editorial opinion

Getting back in shape the hard way

Crackerbarrel DEBATE

By STEVE BARNABY

My feet squirmed in the tight-fitting figure skates. Taking a deep breath, I stood up and readied myself for the challenge of the decade.

The last time a pair of ice skates graced my feet was 16 years ago. I was 13 and wasn't what a person would label a hot-shot skater. But, in the name of good health, I recently decided to don a pair of skates.

Being tied to a desk is ruinous to the health. During the warmer months, a bicycle keeps the arteries free of rust. Ice skating was the safest activity I could think of to keep the heart pumping during the winter.

Some rink manager once told me skating was good for a person's health. Being rather cynical, I figured he was just spreading gossip to boost his own business. But, after two years' deliberation, I decided to give it a shot.

So, about two weeks ago, I humbly re-entered the rink.

Things haven't changed much on the recreational skating scene. A lot of kids were hanging around, all looking like they were having a good time and skating with what I found to be an unconcerting air of confidence.

I SLITHERED ONTO THE ICE.

What? Could it be true that after these many years ice was more slippery? I know that ice skating is much more popular than in the past. Perhaps the increased popularity caused advocates to produce slippery ice, I told myself.

Being prudent, I started out slowly—so very slowly.

I creaked along, wondering if I would make it full circle. Some kid half my size and a quarter my age whizzed by. I rocked precariously, fighting to maintain my balance.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, the skaters sped by, magnifying the inability of unused limbs to navigate the ice in a respectable fashion.

Once around I made it.
My confidence inflated a bit.
My strides lengthened.

"I think I can, I think I can, at any rate I'll try," I told myself, mimicking the old children's tale about the the little engine that could.

A smile creased my face, as I greeted fellow skaters with an air of confidence. Gosh it felt good. I breathed deeply and skated a little faster.

I stumbled across the surface. In former days I had skated with a pair of hockey skates. They don't have that wretched tooth-edged front as do figure skates. I must remember that, or I would be sure to fall.

"You can't drag your toe, Barnaby."

A friend told me not to have the toes ground down. "If you really get good, you'll need the figure skating toe to do the fancy stuff," she said.

Sure.

Sweat creased my brow. Feeling a bit more confident, I unzipped my jacket and thrust my hands into my pockets. Now I was getting that old form back.

My imagination dazed my senses as I whirred along the slick surface.

"Here is the famous Olympic skating star, as he performs before thousands of adoring fans," I fantasized.

"Ladies and gentleman, now coming onto the ice is that international hockey star . . . ."

I was really going now. I crouched in a racing position, letting my feet fly around that silly little rink.

Who said I wouldn't be able to skate after all these years?

"Come on kids, just try to keep up with this ice skater."

Turn number four loomed ahead.

"I'll show 'em how to take a corner in style," I thought.

Thump, bump, bang, screech.

I lay strewn across the ice in disarray, having thrown caution to the wind and forgotten about the tooth-edged toes.

Not only is the ice more slippery than it was before, it's a helluva lot harder, I found.

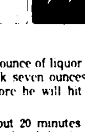
Dazed, I crawled to the edge of the arena and pulled myself up with the aid of the boards.

Suddenly, it was very cold in that ice rink. I crept to the side, diverting my eyes from those who tittered.

I shall return

Know your alcohol limit

Eccentricities



by HANK HOGAN

According to the Automobile Club of Michigan, more than 50 per cent of the fatal accidents in the state involve a drinking driver.

We can pass all sorts of laws requiring the use of seatbelts, and air bags, but the priority to save lives really revolves around alcohol and automobiles.

In many countries in Europe, people who are arrested for drunk driving will lose their driver's license for life. This harsh penalty means that these people must use taxis or hire drivers, because the risk is not worth the chance of punishment.

IN MICHIGAN a person is presumed to be driving under the influence of liquor if his blood alcohol concentration by weight equals 0.1 per cent.

At 0.07 per cent a driver can be arrested for impaired driving.

These various percentages mean very little if one doesn't know how alcohol affects one's own particular system.

Under Michigan law, if you are stopped by a peace officer he can ask you to take a breathalyzer test. If you refuse, you can lose your license for 90 days.

THE BREATHALYZER is a little metal box into which you breathe through a long, plastic tube. The box then calculates your blood-alcohol concentration.

From experience, experts tell us that a 150-pound person would have to have consumed five ounces of 80 proof liquor within a one-hour period to reach 0.1 per cent blood-alcohol level.

Most drinks served in a home run at least an ounce and a half, which means three drinks gives you very close to the limit.

One beer is equivalent to one ounce of liquor.

A 200-pound person can drink seven ounces of 80 proof liquor in an hour before he will hit 0.1 percent.

THERE IS A DELAY of about 20 minutes between the time a drink is finished and the time it reaches the blood stream. Also, the body will use up approximately 0.015 per cent for each hour that elapses from the last drink.

Thus, to be safe, a 150-pound person must drink no more than three ounces of 80 proof liquor in an hour, which will put him at 0.06 per cent.

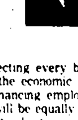
After his initial drink he can not consume more than one ounce of liquor per hour if he expects to avoid being an impaired driver.

AS AN EXPERIMENT, I tested the system with the Michigan State Police. I drank three highballs, each containing one ounce of liquor, in a one-hour period and registered 0.05 per cent on the breathalyzer, and I weigh slightly over 160 pounds.

It is very important to know your own limit before you get behind the wheel of a car. The life you save may be your own, or that of a loved one.

Two big ideas, but they won't produce more jobs

Observation Point



by PHILIP H. POWER

High unemployment is Michigan's biggest problem.

Gov. Milliken made it the crucial issue in his State of the State message last week when he said, "With the state's unemployment rate hovering in the 10-15 per cent range, it becomes critical to make every effort to alleviate the situation through the creation of new jobs and the revitalization of existing unemployment activities."

Ten to 15 per cent unemployment statewide means thousands out of work. In the metropolitan area, the situation is worse; high unemployment has been a disease in Detroit for many years.

The statistics understate the size of the problem because they measure only those persons who are actively seeking work and ignore many thousands who have given up the quest.

What makes it even worse is that the automobile industry—by far the greatest source of jobs in the area—went through substantial belt-tightening over the past 18 months while car sales were collapsing. Even with rebounding consumer demand for cars spurring high production, industry sources estimate this rate can be sustained with 100,000 fewer jobs overall than in comparable past years.

GIVEN THESE FACTS, it would seem obvious that the governor and the legislature would be placing the greatest possible emphasis on producing an economic climate which would favor job creation.

Yet the two most significant state economic policies of the past year—the new single business tax and the governor's proposal for a real estate tax plan to favor Detroit and older suburbs at the expense of rapidly growing ones—will both result in reducing the number of jobs made available by the private sector.

Take first the new single business tax, which replaced eight separate business taxes (on profits, inventories, liquid assets, shareholders' equity and so on) this year.

The new tax is based on the sum of profits, total payroll and a percentage of depreciation charged to plant and equipment.

Milliken claims that "by affecting every business identically, regardless of the economic size of the business or means of financing employed by the business," the new tax will be equally fair to all businesses. This is certainly true.

THE PROBLEM lies in what economists call "differential tax incidence." This is a fancy way of asking whose ox is being gored deeper by the new tax than it was under the old package.

As between types of businesses, the new SBT will favor capital-intensive ones over labor-intensive ones, mature businesses with high profit margins over new businesses with low profits, manufacturing concerns over service concerns.

A new structure which favors buying machines at the expense of hiring workers and gives comparative tax relief to older manufacturing companies at the expense of new and growing service businesses is hardly an incentive for business to create lots of much-needed jobs.

A SIMILAR contradiction emerges when Milliken's proposal to change the real estate tax system is examined.

The aim of the change appears sound: to allow growing suburban communities to retain one-half the increased property tax resulting from new developments, such as shopping centers, while allocating the other half of the increased revenue to older suburbs not experiencing growth and to Detroit.

This proposal, in theory, strikes to the heart of a serious problem in this region—i.e., that development in the new suburbs sucks tax base out of the older areas, thereby contributing to their deterioration.

In practice, however, there are difficulties with the plan.

First, allocating only half of the increased tax revenue generated by new developments to their suburban community may well not cover the additional service costs such developments generate. Suburban officials are worried whether the added tax base from developments can fully cover the added costs of roads and traffic congestion, police and fire protection, and other services required as a result of business growth.

If only half the new taxes were available, growing suburban communities might well opt for sharply reducing their rates of growth.

"Fine," say the advocates of more balanced regional growth. "Such a decision will force new development back into the older suburbs and Detroit, which is where it belongs."

A GOOD THEORY, again, but a weak one under examination.

Any development worth much in real estate taxes—a new shopping center or a new factory—takes a lot of land. But older urban areas' land costs are so high, and assembling many little pieces of land into an adequately sized parcel is so difficult, that large-scale developments in the core city seem unlikely.

So the net result of the proposed tax sharing plan would be to slow down new developments and the new jobs they create in the suburbs, while at the same time doing nothing to insure that new development can effectively take place in Detroit or in the older suburbs.

WHAT WE HAVE here are two excellent illustrations of the difficulty of trying to meet social objectives by government act.

In the case of the single business tax, state government's attempt to give a tax break to the automobile industry will result in a disincentive to other, more rapidly growing sectors of the economy to create the new jobs which everybody agrees are needed.

In the case of the proposed property tax sharing plan, a governmental attempt to spread out tax revenues and promote development in older areas will likely result in stopping development altogether.

These cases are perfect examples of why the public is so suspicious of government action: They often are conflictive with social goals, and they just as often produce precisely the reverse of the result they were intended to promote.

A new twist to an old property tax plot

Tim Richard writes

It was a new twist to an old idea when Gov. William Milliken proposed a "share the wealth" property tax plan to help aid Detroit and some of the older suburbs.

Milliken proposed that half of the property tax levied on new business growth in southeastern Michigan go into a common pot and be allocated to cities, villages and townships.

For years, farmers have been advocating a similar idea. They would like to see industrial property taxes collected on a countywide basis and parcelled out to school districts on a per-pupil basis. Rep. Roy Smith (R-Ypsilanti) has such a bill in the hopper.

The farmers would thus have the best of both worlds: They could sink their pitchforks into the urban industrial tax base; but they wouldn't have to give up their little kingdoms, they wouldn't have to annex to the city school districts and they wouldn't have to share the taxes on their farms.

MILLIKEN'S PROPOSAL uses the same general technique but with different anticipated results: Detroit and such low-growth suburbs as Oak Park and Inkster would be the beneficiaries—Detroit in particular.

Milliken spent little time on the rationale, but I've heard the line of reasoning before, and it goes like this:

"Business is running away from its responsibilities to the city. Industry really belongs in Detroit. A free society can't stop industry from moving out of Detroit, but it can make sure Detroit gets the tax advantage so that it can care for the problems that are left behind."

If implemented, the "share the wealth" system could be expected to have a dampening effect on industrial mobility. The theory is that industry would get no tax break by escaping to the suburbs, so it wouldn't abandon Detroit.

INDUSTRIALISTS I've talked to who have moved to the suburbs from Detroit commonly give two reasons.

First, on the record, they say they had no room to expand in their old, cramped Detroit quarters.

Second, off the record, they say they got sick and tired of having their places vandalized by what is euphemistically known as "the community," and they feared for the safety of their employees—the females, in particular.

Taxes almost never enter the discussion.

ON ITS FACE, Milliken's proposal has a major soft spot. "Sharing the wealth" would apply only to municipal taxes—not to school taxes.

Industrial taxes are gravy to school districts. They are pure revenue, and the schools don't have to perform services for them.

But for cities, townships and villages, there is cost as well as revenue when industry moves in—traffic congestion, building inspection, fire protection, trash collection, beautification, and so on. There's strong logic for letting communities keep all the taxes that industry generates.

Ken Courtney, Troy's finance director, put a philosophical objection rather well: "You go ahead and do all the work, and I'll take the benefits." He is referring to the unfortunate polarization of American government into two classes—the taxpayers and the tax eaters.

ONE HATES to cuss Milliken, who has demonstrated more concern for urban areas (not just core cities but entire urban areas) and the environment than any five other governors.

But his zealous idea to help this region help itself is full of pitfalls. The Legislature hasn't fallen for the farmers' trick to get industrial taxes, and it's unlikely to buy this one.

The world's going to the rocks

Some folks were baffled when they opened their holiday presents to discover they had received a plain, old stone.

Not a piece of coal, like Santa used to give bad little Dutch and German children. A stone.

The instructions with it said the rock could be trained to do tricks and would become a nice pet if treated with love. You could even paper-train it.

It was a perfect gift for apartment dwellers who aren't allowed living, breathing, furry pets. A pet rock is a good listener, for one thing, and doesn't lip off at you, bark or whine in the middle of the night.

And it doesn't need to be taken for walks in frigid weather.

A local television station got into the act by having a load of rocks dumped in its parking lot. Their object: to find homes for homeless rocks.

West Bloomfield Observer & Eccentric
DIVISION OF SUBURBAN COMMUNICATIONS CORPORATION

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644-1100

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