

M-275 study came late and short

By DAVID RAY

A Michigan Environmental Review Board (MERB) committee was ready to recommend that the preferred alignment for M-275 be approved before the project was cancelled.

But the committee's recommendation and report were never made because the Michigan State Highway Commission voted to scrap M-275 on Jan. 25, 1977, five days before MERB was scheduled to receive the committee's recommendations.

The committee was asked to study the two major alternatives to the cancelled M-275 freeway. It was ready to recommend that the full 17-member MERB should find the draft environmental impact statement on the controversial freeway project to be adequate and support the preferred freeway alignment.

Two members of the highway commission—Chairman Peter Fletcher and Weston Vivian—said last week they were unaware of the committee's report when they and Commissioner Hamlet Mayers Jr. voted for cancellation of the 24-mile, six-lane freeway that would have connected I-96 in Novi to I-75 near Holly through western Oakland County.

HIGHWAY COMMISSIONERS in late 1975 said they would wait for the MERB's recommendation, before taking action on the M-275 freeway plans. But Vivian said last week that the commission "decided for its own reasons to cancel M-275, and that made the MERB report irrelevant."

G. Robert Adams, administrator of the Highway Department's Environmental and Community Factors Division, said he and Highway Department Director John Woodard knew the contents of the committee's report.

But Adams added that he doubted whether any highway commission members were aware of the document.

Woodford is the department's representative on MERB. Adams is the alternative representative.

Although the committee's report was ready in September 1977, MERB didn't discuss the recommendations because it was waiting for an addendum to the draft environmental impact statement, said Terry Yonker of the review board's staff.

The addendum, which was intended to address some of the concerns expressed by the groups that opposed M-275, was completed by the Michigan Department of State Highways and Transportation two days before the highway commission's action to scrap the controversial project and a week before MERB's January meeting.

WOODFORD ON Jan. 27, 1977, informed MERB that the draft environmental statement on M-275 was being withdrawn.

The MERB committee—composed of Francis Bennett, retired chairman of the Wayne County Planning Commission, Dr. Dennis Tierney, of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and John Calkins, of the Michigan Department of Agriculture—supported the original M-275 plans subject to

• Further justification of the original alignment, as opposed to the "no build" or other alternative, by expanding discussion of several items in the draft environmental impact statement.

• Preservation of the black spruce bog at Haggerty and West Maple roads, which has since been drained as part of a peat mining operation.

• A study of a narrower right-of-way

for the roadway "in the interest of sharing land with other uses."

• Mitigation of noise from the freeway and a traffic screen including plantings and mounds of berms "because of the sensitive environmental nature and level of development occurring. The varied topography of the area facilitates doing this."

• Urging the DNR to "find a way, by acquisition or strict use of permit power, to preserve the other bogs of ecological significance, such as the Carus bog northwest of Haggerty and Pontiac Trail.

In calling for further justification of the original M-275, the committee said that a "Highway network is designed to serve many categories of movement desired, both local and long distance."

"SOME CATEGORIES WILL be unserved, if a segment of one route is missing. The I-96 to M-36 link is such a case."

"This is not to say that (the Northwestern Highway) extension is similarly needed. That route has other options. The committee does not assume (that) the M-275 project is inseparable from Northwestern Highway," the committee reported.

The committee also stated "Northerly and southerly links have been carried to a point where the gap should be closed," and "Many private and governmental decisions have been made on the expectations that the (M-275) plan would be carried out."

The committee's report went on to say that "The area is conspicuously lacking in county or local roads having continuity. North-south local traffic is now difficult. It will be facilitated by the freeway, due both to its availability to some local users and to its removal of some traffic from existing local roads."

Freeway opponents argued that M-275 would harm recreational areas in western Oakland County, but the MERB committee stated that the freeway "has been planned as access to these (public recreational spaces) thus relieving local roads. But, more importantly, permitting the general regional public to enjoy their beauty and their services."

The committee also noted that the DNR and highway department had reached an agreement on a replacement parcel for 72 acres of Dodge Park Number Five, at Commerce and South Commerce roads in the M-275 alignment, for 173 acres that would be added to the Proud Lake State Recreation Area.

COMMENTING ON THE M-275 opponents' statement that construction of the freeway would promote further growth in the area, the MERB committee noted that figures showed this "area has been growing for some time, and about one-third of its residents are newcomers within the last five years."

"The subject area of Oakland County will continue to grow, or change, regardless of M-275. Obviously, the pattern of its growth or change will be different with M-275 than would otherwise be the case."

The MERB committee is awaiting information from the highway department on two major alternatives to M-275 in order to make a recommendation on the environmental impacts of those plans.

The committee's chairman wouldn't further discuss the report on the original M-275 proposal because the freeway has been cancelled. He admitted that the panel was "in a position to carry out our obligation to MERB."

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The Michigan conference, planned for spring, 1979 will be underwritten

by a \$25,000 federal grant. Delegates will go to Washington for the national conference in September.

Planning for the state-wide effort is under the direction of state librarian Francis Scannell and a steering committee chaired by Jean Lowrie, director of the school of librarianship at Western Michigan University.

For more information about planning day at OCC, contact Douglas Zyskowski, deputy city librarian at the Southfield Public Library, or call the state library at (517) 373-1593.

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