

Bill filled with loopholes

Lawmakers dilute lobby reform

By JOE MARTUCCI

"It's enough to want to make you tear your hair out."

That's Jan Elisman's dismal assessment of what she regards as a diluted version of a formerly tough lobby reform bill approved last week by the state legislature.

While most people wouldn't lose any sleep over the issue, Mrs. Elisman, a practicing psychologist and Bloomfield Township resident, claims to have ample reason to be upset. She's state chairwoman of Common Cause, a political reform group which had fought for lobby reform in Michigan for two years.

"I think what we've got is considerably less than half a loaf," said Mrs. Elisman, referring to the weakened legislation. "The legislature has failed to give us a good lobbying bill because there are too many loopholes. They made a mistake capitulating and got scared because time was running out."

Despite the setback, Mrs. Elisman said Common Cause, which claims 8,000 members state-wide, hasn't given up on lobby reform.

"We'll come back next year and see if we can come up with something that has some teeth in it. Our whole focus is to make government more responsible. There's no way we can do that without knowing where the influence lies."

"Michigan is really developing into a special interest state and it's becoming

more and more serious. It's practically making the whole legislative process unworkable. Lobbying is big business. It's not small potatoes."

Mrs. Elisman, whose husband, James, is a Birmingham attorney and unsuccessful U.S. Senate candidate, contends that Common Cause, unlike the other lobbying groups it seeks to regulate, does not represent special interests.

"We try to represent the citizens at large, but we don't spend any private money in doing so. We don't do it by buying lunch for legislators or providing them with football tickets."

"It's a very professional organization. We're not a bunch of old ladies in tennis shoes running around and trying to do good."

MRS. ELSMAN's involvement in Common Cause, which was founded in 1970, stemmed from frustration with party politics.

"I've been a political activist for a long time and have always been interested in that kind of thing. I was involved in Democratic party politics for about 10 years and got on the state central committee, but I felt like I was unable to influence the course of what I considered to be important issues. These decisions weren't being made where I was."

"So I got disenchanted with politics and got out for a couple of years. It seemed like everyone was being represented but the people."

But when Common Cause was born

Mrs. Elisman found what she considers the ideal vehicle for political activism. Her disenchantment gave way to zeal. "I'm not a pie-in-the-sky idealist. I'm a realist with hope," she says.

She spends up to 30 hours a week at her volunteer post, reading bills, holding meetings, handling administrative tasks and contacting legislators. She was chief lobbyist for the Open Meetings Law, which she says has "made a big difference in increasing citizen access to government."

IN ADDITION to her part-time psychology practice, Mrs. Elisman is also an avid tennis player and mother of two children. But her favorite topic of conversation, it seems, is government and its reform.

"It's fun. I guess I'm a little weird. I don't want to be the typical suburban matron. It's important and interesting work. I have a fundamental belief in our form of government, but I also believe we only get the kind of government we deserve."

Mrs. Elisman denies Common Cause is really an arm of the Democratic party, but concedes that's a commonly held belief.

"Political reform isn't a partisan issue," she maintains. "We never support candidates. Because we are reform-minded, that's perceived as a Democratic thing. But we have a lot of Republican members."

Unlike the League of Women Voters, which studies a wide range of issues but eschews active lobbying and the consumer oriented Michigan Citizens

Lobby, Common Cause "concentrates on process issues so the system will be more responsive to any group that comes down the pike, whether it be environmental or whatever."

"We see ourselves as a catalyst and as activists and we try to concentrate our activity as a lobbying group (on a few issues at a time)."

The tax revolt is a symptom of growing frustration with government, she says. That frustration often turns to apathy, but it should be a call to action.

The average Joe feels helpless. The big movement (for reform) in the past seven or eight years is a reaction to that helplessness. A lot of people don't pay attention—they don't even vote. I think by joining an organization like Common Cause you can start doing more than you ever dreamed you could."

"It's an education, like a mini-course in government. A lot of people feel incompetent to get involved in the legislative process, but they're wrong because you can learn if you want to."

"People are angry and the tax revolt is one way they're showing it, but they really don't know how to go about it. If you're interested in politics you can really make a difference this way. One letter doesn't make a heck of a lot of difference—it's like blowing in the wind."

Mrs. Elisman, who has held her post for 1 1/2 years and plans to step down early next year, has no plans to run for office as her husband did.

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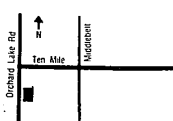
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