

Founder is gone, but Citizens Lobby drives on

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Doug Ross may be gone, but his Michigan Citizens Lobby is still rolling over institutional toes.

Ross, a Democrat who won a seat in the Michigan State Senate last week, founded the lobby in 1973 to badger the state legislature and other institutions about the average Joe's concerns.

Those concerns, he and his followers contended, were usually ignored by a legislature whose attention was monopolized by the professional lobbyists of powerful special-interest groups.

Ross and his attention-getting antics paved the way for a number of the fledgling group's early victories including the auto repair protection act and the repeal of the sales tax on food and medicine.



DOUG ROSS
fish and fowl



FAY GATES
lobby's alive

"DOUG WAS probably one of the most exciting persons I've ever known," said citizens lobby co-director Fay Gates.

"God knows, he ran the most exciting press conferences.

"He had a lot of flair," she said. "He had the ability to put coalitions together. He had the ability to motivate people."

When Ross decided to run down the campaign trail for himself and take a plunge in the political pool, many

expected the lobby to slip into the shadows. The lobby's heart and soul was gone, they said.

They forgot, however, to tell the lobby's full-time staff and its 35,000 members. Membership has increased steadily since 1973 and Mrs. Gates expects to enlist about 10,000 new troops in 1979. All it takes to join, she said, is \$15 and the willingness to raise a fuss.

THE LOBBY, Mrs. Gates said, currently has its sights set on Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Michigan, the state's utility companies and friend of the court operators.

The seemingly never-ending crusade against the Blues, Michigan's largest health-care insurer, has become the lobby's top priority. In recent months, for example, it has:

- Intervened in the Blues' request

- for a \$55 million rate increase.
- Lobbied to open the Blues' books and boardroom to public scrutiny.
- Lobbied to restructure the Blues' board of directors. Lobby leaders contend that the board is dominated by hospital administrators, doctors and pharmacists, who, they say, have an undeniable conflict of interest because payments from the insurance company are a source of their incomes.
- Granted the Blues' board its "Ostrich Award" for an "unparalleled ability to ignore reality and bury its head in the sand."

ANOTHER CAMPAIGN has citizens lobbyists writing legislation to finance consumer representation before the Michigan Public Service Commission, the state's utility regulator.

According to lobby co-director Joe Tuchinsky, utility companies spend massive sums on research, expert consultants, lawyers, transcripts and travel for each application for a rate increase.

Tuchinsky said Detroit Edison reported that it spent nearly \$154,000 to argue for a \$82.4 million rate increase. The increase was approved in March 1976.

By comparison, the attorney general's office, which officially represents consumer interests at the public service commission's rate hearings, had a 1977 budget of \$225,000 for all utility case work.

"Obviously, consumers are at a disadvantage because utilities can vastly outspend them and then charge the customers for their expenses," Tuchinsky said.

THE VERDICT is still out on the success of their more recent campaigns.

But there has been a sharp change in the lobby's style since Ross left.

Staffers hesitantly admit that there is a different tone now and the loss of

Ross may have hurt.

The lobby lost another important staff member when strategist and tactician Barbara Grossman joined Carl Levin's campaign for the U.S. Senate. Tuchinsky has replaced Ross at the head of the organization, and there is a definite difference between them. Where Ross was flashy and fun-loving, staffers say Tuchinsky is unemotional and professional.

Staffers say, however, that it is too soon to say whether the difference will affect actions or policy. "Mrs. Gates said, 'Joe doesn't use the medal as effectively as Doug did."

"But its really too early and unfair to compare the two," she said.

Owners needn't await recall of '500' tires

Motorists with Firestone "500" steel-belted radial tires which are being recalled can go to dealers for immediate replacement, according to the Automobile Club of Michigan.

"Motorists can determine if their tires are affected by the recall simply by checking the serial number of the tires on the inward exterior wall," said Robert Smith, Auto Club's emergency road service manager.

"Although letters to owners of certain blocks of the '500' tire won't be mailed for at least the next 30-60 days, Firestone officials say free replacement is available now at dealers," said Smith.

Smith advises motorists to make appointments prior to bringing the tires to dealers for replacement. A survey of Firestone dealers in the Detroit areas shows most have a good

supply of replacement tires.

Tires to be recalled, following a written settlement with the federal government, besides the "500," include private brand Firestone tires similar in construction to the "500" and some Firestone "TPC" tires made to General Motors Corp. specifications.

Three groups of Firestone tires are under immediate recall, with details

to be worked out for the other tires.

Tires to be replaced free by Firestone dealers include: radial "500" five-ribbed; "500" seven-ribbed and the "TPC."

Only five-ribbed "500s" bearing serial numbers ending in the digits 355 through 526, seven-ribbed "500s" with serial numbers ending in digits 176 through 355 and "TPC" tires with serial numbers ending in 176 through 355 will be replaced without proof of purchase.



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