

Road chairman finds job thankless

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Fred Houghten is caught in an unenviable position. As chairman of the road commission in road-conscious Oakland County, he is faced with trying to improve the maintenance and conditions of an ever-increasing system of roads, which he says can't be improved without changes in the state's highway funding formula.

The 58-year-old former Rochester Oldsmobile dealer and banker said that most Oakland County residents feel the road commission's work isn't up to snuff, especially during and after winter's snowy bursts.

"Everybody can see their problems," Houghten said, "but they don't see that we cover 900 square miles and have 2,600 miles of roads to maintain."

"We'd have to increase our maintenance spending by one-third to make people realize that we've improved. That would jeopardize our construction program and our summer maintenance program," he said.

Ideally the \$2.5 million winter maintenance budget should be increased by \$1 million, he said.

But, he added, "The job that we do is a pretty magnificent job for the dollars we have."

WINTER GIVES the road commission and Oakland County travelers enough headaches, Houghten said, but the complaints are compounded by Oakland's half-rural, half-urban demography.

"There are so many people who live in the rural areas with gravel roads who have lived there for years," said Houghten, a long-time Avon Township resident. "They don't expect that much."

"The persons who expect a lot are the ones who have recently moved out there. These are people who are moving out of Berkeley, Pleasant Ridge and Ferndale."

"They expect that they're going to have good services, the same type of services they had. They're just not going to get it."

"Development," he added, "doesn't give us any more money."

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more maintenance and construction on major county roads which are continually pounded by cars, vans and trucks that crowd their two lanes. It also means more subdivisions for which the road commission is responsible.

Houghten said 35 miles of new subdivision roads were added to road commission's network last year. This year, he estimates, 75 more miles could be added.

In an effort to free road commission equipment and personnel for more pressing service on the larger county roads, Houghten said he is trying to convince urbanizing townships — such as West Bloomfield — to take over responsibility for maintaining subdivision streets.

That will be no easy task, even for a man with Houghten's political and business experience. Houghten, who is director of regional development for Community National Bank, is the chief spokesman for the three-man, all-Republican board of road commissioners, but the day-to-day operations are left in the hands of full-time Managing Director John Grubbs.

Even though Houghten calls roads "apolitical," he works in an intensely political atmosphere. As a former elected Oakland County commissioner and chairman of that board, the mild-mannered, contemplative Houghten is no stranger to county politics.

EVEN IF HOUGHTEN is successful in shifting subdivision streets to the townships, the improvements he says are necessary for the county's major roads will be slow in coming. He estimated it would take at least \$300 million to bring Oakland's roads up to "standard." "After 15 or 20 years, all your roads need major repairs and that takes a heck of a lot of money," he said.

Not the least of the problem, he said, is the need to widen many major county two-lane roads to handle the greatly-increased volumes of traffic. "Many of the 'mile' roads in the southern part of the county need to be five-laned. And many of the 'mile' roads need to be resurfaced. And then there are many roads that need to be paved, period."

THE KEY to solving those problems, he insisted, is money. And the money that Houghten says

the road commission needs hasn't been coming from Lansing.

"Oakland County is getting shortchanged," Houghten said.

"Take Wayne County. Their percentage of the pie is considerably more than ours. Yet we have more miles of roads."

Each county's share of the proceeds of the state gasoline and weight tax is determined by a formula approved by the state legislature.

The road commission chairman said that for Oakland County to get a bigger slice of the pie, the legislature would have to alter the funding formula. That would mean other counties would be losing portions of their shares.

"Who in Lansing is going to vote to take money from their county?" Houghten asked.



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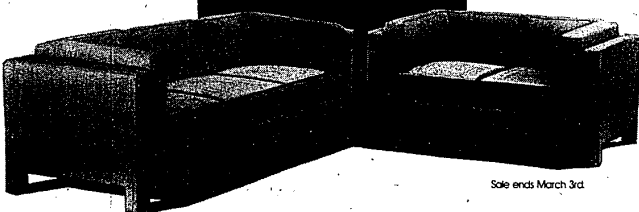
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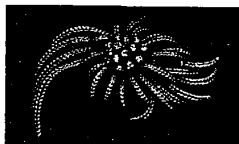
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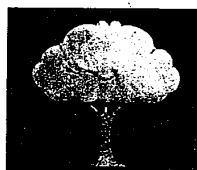
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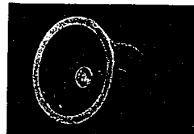
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