

New power play in M-275 dispute

By TOM LONERGAN

The Michigan Transportation Commission's M-275 decision, expected by the end of the year, may have implications far greater than a freeway through western Oakland County.

The new six-member commission may face a showdown with State Department of Transportation Director John Woodford concerning its power. And the showdown could be over the revived M-275 freeway, long favored by state highway engineers.

The transportation department favors building a modified M-275 freeway which would connect I-96 near Novi with I-75 near Clarkston.

A recent opinion from Michigan Attorney General Frank Kelley limits the commission's authority to establishing "policy" for the transportation department. Kelley's interpretation of a constitutional amendment, which created the new commission, has raised questions about the commission's authority over highway alignments and whether to build a freeway.

According to assistant attorney general Solomon Bienenfeld, the opinion "may have impact on the authority of the commission to veto or authorize construction" of M-275.

Nonetheless, in a 16-page report favoring a modified freeway, Woodford and highway engineers ask the commission to determine if the state trunkline plan will include M-275, what its corridor will be and what type of highway should be built.

A referendum, passed by voters last fall, made the transportation department director an appointee of the governor — not the commission — and broadened his powers. The

new commission does not have the power to administer the department, replaced by the former State Highway Commission which it replaced.

THE TRANSPORTATION Commission, meeting in Lansing last week, decided to get together with Gov. William Milliken, Kelley and top legislative leaders to discuss the impact of Kelley's opinion.

The new commission also will consider hiring a consultant to determine how it sets policy.

Commissioner Roger Young, an attorney from Rochester, wasn't pleased with the idea of a consultant.

"What the consultant says isn't going to interest me too much because I believe the Michigan Constitution says the power is at this table," Young said at last week's meeting.

Young does not agree that the commission lacks authority on a decision like M-275.

"Anything that goes to alignment is still clearly in the purview of the commission in my view," Young said.

Young is one of three newcomers to the commission with Lawrence Patrick, Jr., an attorney from Detroit and William Marshall of Lansing, head of the state AFL-CIO.

Marshall is among those commissioners who aren't sure of the commission's authority.

Regarding M-275, he said, "I'm not absolutely frozen in on a freeway, if we have a voice in it."

Patrick proposed the meeting with top state officials sensing a "fear that (commission) actions taken might be set aside or vacated." He suggested the commission determine how it would function with the transportation department and hinted the dispute may end up before the state Supreme Court.

Commission Chairman Hannes Meyers, Jr. of Zeeland, said the attorney general's opinion "may not be as ominous as first thought."

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— Commissioner Young

But Meyers, a holdover from the old Highway Commission who voted to drop M-275 more than two years ago, urged more clarification of the commission's authority.

"I hope we don't get to the point where people say the decision was made by the wrong body," he said, referring to M-275.

THE COMMISSION last week urged the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) to review its position on M-275.

SEMCOG hasn't changed its 1990 master plan for the area, which includes the scrapped original freeway. Executive Director Michael Glusac was expected to ask the regional planning agency's executive council last week to authorize a new SEMCOG study of the six alternatives proposed in the past two-and-a-half years.

Glusac said SEMCOG's view of the alternatives probably wouldn't be ready for the Transportation Commission's Sept. 26 meeting in Oakland County.

The commission is holding the meeting in the county Board of Commissioners auditorium in Pontiac to hear the opinions of those pro and con regarding the modified freeway.

And the transportation commission shouldn't expect SEMCOG to favor one particular alternative, Glusac said, since it is not an implementing agency that gets into detail.

But, Glusac noted, residents in western Oakland County have "suffered a long time from inaction" on the M-275 issue. He said rural roads exist in the western end of the county "for an urban population."

"Some kind of action is needed," Glusac said. "What's better or worse, we can't give to you today."

The importance of SEMCOG's position on the area is noted in a Transportation Department summary of the M-275 alternatives.

Because SEMCOG's regional transportation plan calls for a freeway, the report said, any change would require a revision of the SEMCOG plan before federal approval — and federal funding of whatever road is built — could be obtained.

THE MODIFIED M-275 freeway would be six lanes, with a bicycle path. The differences from the original freeway include a location west of the Black Spruce Bog near Haggerty and Maple roads and includes landscaped noise berms. The Commerce Road interchange would be moved to reduce the amount of land needed from Dodge Park No. 5.

Except for those changes, the modified freeway is essentially the same as recommended in past years. The highway engineers summary report notes a freeway has been part of the western Oakland corridor plan for the past 15 years.

Whatever decision the Transportation Commission makes by the end of the year, it will be quite a while before supporters of a north-south trunkline in western Oakland County see a road.

"No matter what we do with M-275," said Commissioner Weston Vivian of Ann Arbor, "a travelable highway won't be in existence for 10 years."

State highway engineers said new federal regulations would require environmental impact studies of whatever alternative is chosen.

Troy leads county boom in population

Oakland County had an estimated 98,000 more people last year than in 1970, while Wayne County's population dropped 10 percent during the decade.

The 1970 census was Troy, which SEMCOG estimates grew 71 percent from 39,419 in 1970 to 67,400 by mid-1978.

The southeast region as a whole showed a decline of about 38,000 people, according to population growth estimates recently released by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG).

The regional planning agency estimated Detroit has lost 283,000 people since 1970. However, Wayne County showed growth in all of its townships with Canton Township nearly tripling (11,026 to 44,000) its population in the eight-year period.

Leading Oakland County's nearly 11 percent growth in population since

the 1970 census was Troy, which SEMCOG estimates grew 71 percent from 39,419 in 1970 to 67,400 by mid-1978.

Ex-O&E photographer found dead in Iowa pool

Harry Mauthe Jr., formerly a photographer for many of the Observer and Eccentric newspapers for the last 13 years, died Saturday in Des Moines, Iowa, at the age of 29.

The apparent cause of death was drowning. The complete autopsy report, however, was unavailable at press time.

Mauthe, a Farmington resident who worked most recently for the Farmington Observer, was found dead in the swimming pool of the Des Moines Hilton Inn about 11 a.m. Saturday. Time of death was placed at 2:15 a.m. Saturday.

He was working as a free-lance photographer at the time of his death and was in Des Moines on a business trip.

Mauthe began working for the O&E papers while still a high school student at Livonia Stevenson. He also worked for the newspapers while a college student at U-M Dearborn before becoming a full-time employee.

THE BODY WILL lie in state this evening at Elton, Black & Sons of Union Lake. Services will be tomorrow at 11 a.m. at St. Andrew Episcopal Church, Livonia.

Interment will be in Ironton, Ohio. Survivors include parents, Dr. Harry Mauthe Sr. and Gloria, a supervising teacher in the Livonia Adult Education program; two brothers, Tom and Jeff, and one sister, Susan. The senior Mauthes are Livonia residents.

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