

Lawmakers debate county reform bill

By TOM LONERGAN

A Wayne County reform bill, as passed by the Michigan Senate last week, may never see the light of day once the House of Representatives and Gov. William Milliken are through with it.

Milliken reportedly opposes the bill because it would continue to grant autonomy to the Wayne County Road Commission even under a new county government.

The bill, which provides for county reorganization through an elected charter commission, last week passed the Senate 23-8, with support from most area senators.

SENATE MAJORITY Leader William Faust, D-Westland, and State Sens. Robert Geake, R-Norville, and Donald Bishop, R-Rochester, supported the bill which would give Wayne County voters a choice between an elected county executive or appointed county manager to head a new government.

Geake's district includes Livonia, Plymouth and Redford. Bishop's covers the Birmingham and West Bloomfield areas, as well as Rochester. Faust's covers Garden City and Canton Township.

State Sen. William Huffman, D-Madison Heights, whose district includes Troy, opposed the bill after successfully amending it to preserve the road commission's independence.

State Sen. Douglas Ross, D-Oak Park, was absent for the Wayne County reform vote. Ross's district includes Southfield, Farmington and parts of west Oakland County.

THE HOUSE is expected to heavily amend the bill once the Legislature resumes after the Thanksgiving recess.

Chris Cardinal, an aide to Faust, said the House would "play havoc" with the bill and probably send it to a joint legislative conference committee. Faust is currently on a tour of China.

The six-member conference committee would attempt to propose an acceptable version for all sides.

The legislation would amend the County Home Rule Act, which allows counties to elect a charter commission to write a governing charter.

Milliken has made county government reform a condition of any state financial aid for Wayne, which has had increasing budget deficits the past five years. The county will end the current budget year Nov. 30 at least \$18 million in the red.

Milliken supports a county executive for Wayne and wants a charter commission to have authority to modify or eliminate powerful county bodies such as the road commission and Board of Auditors.

The three-man Board of Auditors, 27-member Board of Commissioners and six other county department heads are now elected separately and have diffused authority.

HUFFMAN SAID he voted against the Wayne reform bill because "the senators and representatives from Detroit and people mostly affected opposed the bill."

The vote among Detroit state senators was split, however. The bill was sponsored by Sen. John Kelly, D-Detroit.

Regarding road commission autonomy, Huffman said: "We (in Oakland County) saw fit and everyone in the state has seen fit to have an autonomous drain commission and road commission . . . and it's worked well." Oakland is one of only two counties with an executive.

"Nobody has convinced me that we ought to be doing away with road commissions. There's nothing wrong with the road commission in Wayne County except its autonomy that some people don't like."

— State Sen. Donald Bishop

"The problem in Wayne County is not with the road commission," Huffman added.

GEAKE SAID he supported the bill because "it is a vehicle toward (county) reorganization even though in its present form it is quite weak."

"The guaranteed existence of the road commission has to be a major weakness of the bill. Because of that, the governor may not sign it."

Bishop, who supported adding the road commission protection to the bill, said, "Nobody has convinced me that we ought to be doing away with road commissions."

"There's nothing wrong with the road commission in Wayne County except its autonomy that some people don't like."

The road commission's annual budget is \$100 million, of which nearly one-third is from state gas and weight taxes. The remaining funding sources are state maintenance contracts, federal matching funds, and bonding revenues.

The road commission employs 1,500. Besides maintaining county roads and contracting with the state to maintain state trunklines and freeways, the Wayne road commission also operates Metropolitan Airport and the county parks system.

The road commission's governing body is a three-man board appointed for six-year terms by the elected board of commissioners.

Although he voted for the county reform bill, Bishop said, "Really, it's kind of a sham."

Wayne County could have elected a county executive under existing state law, he said. Western Wayne commissioners have been petitioning for such an election most of this year, but have yet to attain the required number of voter signatures.

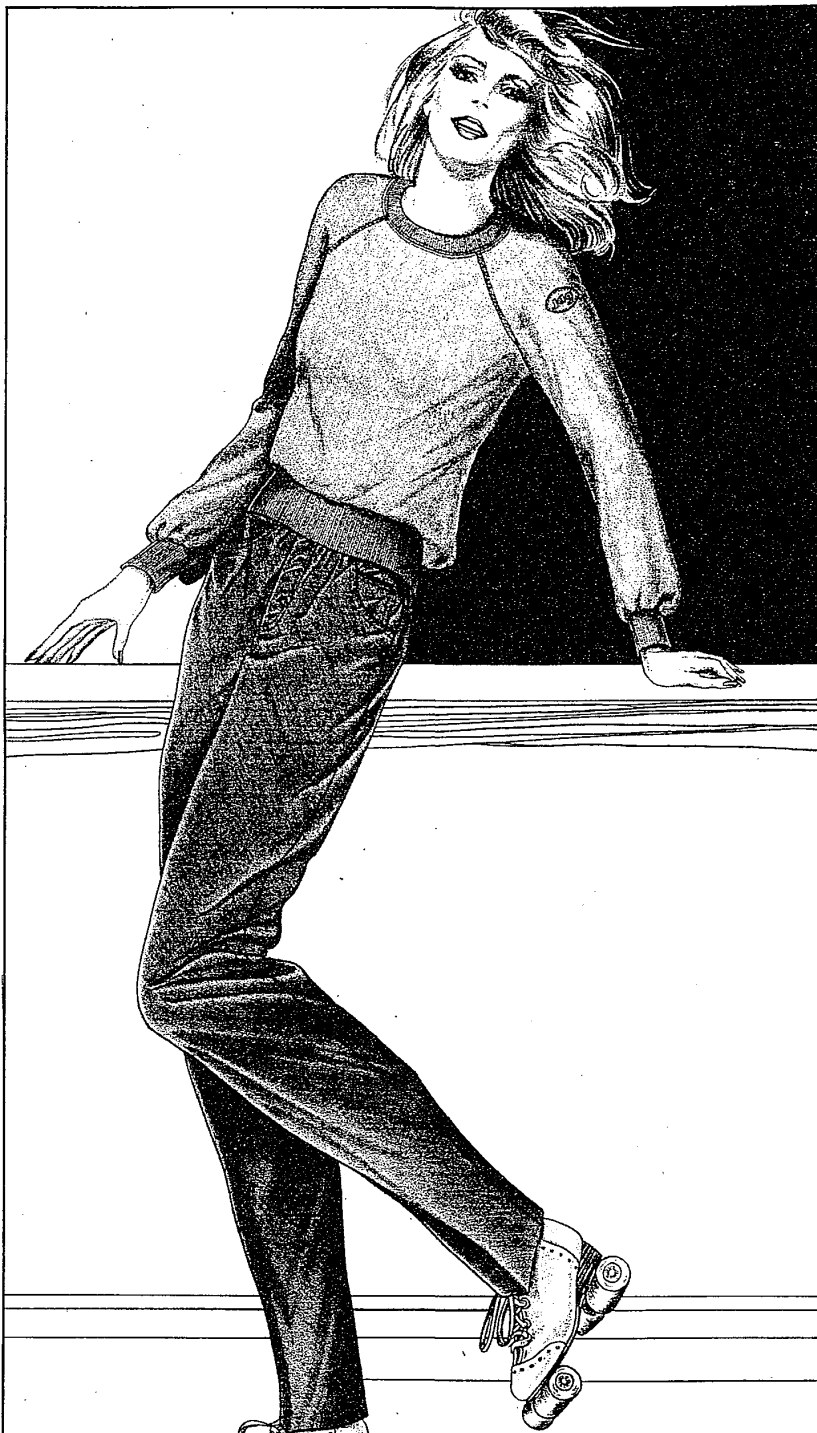
A charter commission, says Bishop, won't "cure the ails of the county until somebody down there puts the house in order."

UNDER THE Senate bill, a charter commission would be elected from the existing 27 county commissioner districts, which were drawn after the 1970 census. An amendment to use 1980 census figures for a charter commission was defeated.

Because Detroit, which has a 15-12 majority on the county board, has lost population this decade, out-county representatives say use of the 1970 census figures shortchanges them.

If a county reform bill is passed and signed by Milliken before the end of the year, voters could decide as early as next May whether a charter commission should be formed. The board of commissioners must agree to put that question on the ballot, however.

THE COMPOSITION of a charter commission would be a key element in the county executive issue. County officials representing Detroit want a county manager, appointed by the county board.



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