

Long-range road funds asked

The Oakland County Road Commission wants a multi-year financing deal with the elected county board of commissioners to achieve longer range planning of road improvements.

"Work could be programmed far enough in advance to get the most bang for your dollars," Road Commission Chairman Fred D. Houghten told the county board Thursday in his "state of the roads" message.

"It would be possible, with such lead time, to attract matching funds and to equitably distribute the benefits around the county," the head of the three-man, appointed road board said.

"Annual funding makes it difficult for other units to rearrange their budgets to participate. Your board would have the final decision on all projects using county money."

"THE ROAD commission's work is financed mainly by state gasoline and weight tax revenues. In recent years, the 27-member county board of commissioners has made annual appropriations of \$500,000. The significance of Houghten's request is that the county board is being asked to commit itself for longer term planning."

"In return, the commissioners would have a voice in road planning."

"Previously, we proposed five-year contracting, but we realize it's difficult

to make such long-range commitments," Houghten conceded. "Year-to-year programming isn't efficient either — and we are currently moving forward to do our own financial planning on a three-year basis beginning with the 1981-84 period. That will coincide with the three-year Federal Highway Administration programs from which we receive most of our federal matching funds."

"We ask that you enter into a contract with us for funding on a three-year basis on terms to be worked out between your board and ours," said Houghten, who pointed out he has been attending all the county board's twice-monthly meetings. Houghten is also a former county commissioner from the Rochester area.

"In every respect, I believe three-year contracting is as sound a concept as would be five-year contracting."

HOUGHTEN SAID the road commission used previous \$500,000 contributions as leverage to get \$1.5 million in countywide road improvements, many aimed at safety features.

"We matched your money with \$500,000 — and we arranged for another \$500,000 of matching funds from 19 cities, one village and 17 townships where projects will be under construction this year," Houghten said.

But Houghten complained that the

road commission's main source of funds, the state gasoline and weight taxes, are failing to increase with the county's needs.

"Roads do not benefit by an increase in revenues when inflation pushes up costs. Our revenues are not tied to sales or income taxes, all of which increase directly with inflation."

"Our revenues are tied to the state rate tax on a gallon of gasoline and the weight of motor vehicles. As the price of both goes up, the number of gallons sold tends to go down, and the weight of cars purchased tends to go down," Houghten said.

"Consequently, while we are currently suffering from double-digit inflation in our costs, as is everyone else, our basic source of revenue is increasing at less than three percent annually. This is a dramatic reversal from the situation prior to the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Until then, our basic revenue increased annually at about the same rate as inflation."

AT ONE TIME the road commission was one of the most unpopular agencies in government. But Houghten said the semi-autonomous department was working hard to achieve good communications with other politicians and with the public. Items:

• Its department of citizen services last year listened to more than 10,000

complaints and questions.

• A questionnaire, published with the annual report for the last two years, has drawn many responses.

• Market Opinion Research has been hired to poll the public and opinion leaders, with results to be announced today (Monday).

• It conducted two seminars attended by 14 commissioners and the county executive.

• It conducted 89 formal public hearings.

• And it appeared by invitation before 12 civic organizations.

Houghten chairs the three-member board. Other members are John Gnaul and Richard Vogt.

MEANWHILE, the road commission announced it has begun revising and updating the countywide master road right-of-way plan.

In many communities, it will mean frontage to be dedicated for future road rights of way may be reduced without impeding future route plans, its announcement said.

Emphasis in the revised plans is on reducing to 120 feet of right of way routes that were designated for 204 feet of right of way and on removing "routes under study" where no public right of way currently exists.

Reconsider subway — road commission

No subway in the Woodward corridor, the Oakland County Road Commission said — again.

"We agree with the Oakland County Board of Commissioners. SEMTA should reconsider its decision to include subway in a regional transit system," Chairman Fred D. Houghten said in a statement last week.

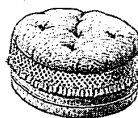
"A survey by an independent polling firm during February and March showed that 63 percent of the voting age population of Oakland County favors transit, but that 58 percent oppose conducting a subway in Detroit," Houghten said.

The board of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority approved a 1990 transportation plan that calls for a light rail rapid transit line in the Woodward corridor. The segment from

downtown Detroit to Grand Boulevard would be underground; the segment from the boulevard to McNichols would be elevated. Oakland County's three representatives favored an at-grade plan, though one finally backed a partial subway in order to keep the planning process moving.

"The action taken by the SEMTA board was not a consensus of the region," Houghten declared. "The 10-5 vote was the result of a blatant political power play coming after SEMTA conducted discussions in secret meetings."

He added, "The consensus that has to be reached is that of the people of this region. The only way to reflect such a consensus now seems to be by conducting a vote of the people."



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