

Silverdome subsidy: lesson in political maneuvers

By TOM LONERGAN

Old-fashioned political back-scratching caused two western Wayne County state representatives to switch their votes and support the controversial \$800,000 state subsidy to the Pontiac Silverdome last week.

Under pressure from Oakland County legislators and Silverdome lobbyists, Livonia Republicans Jack Kirksey and Sylvia Skrel voted to continue the state's annual contribution to the 5-year-old stadium's debt retirement.

In return, they got assurances of con-

tinued state grants of \$800,000 to the city of Livonia and \$775,000 to the city of Northville for policing traffic generated by the Detroit Race Course and Northville Downs, respectively.

Even though House opponents of the Silverdome subsidy prevailed (56-31), the grant is expected to be reinstated by the Senate this week. The entire bill will then go to a joint legislative conference committee.

BOTH LEGISLATORS initially voted with the House of Representatives majority (62-30) Wednesday to re-

move the Silverdome subsidy from the annual grants and transfers bill.

Then, according to Kirksey, the phone started ringing. He said he was called by "three or four senators and a couple of lobbyists."

The calls, said Kirksey, were "of a nature that said, 'If you vote to take the (Silverdome) money out, we're going to do everything we can in the Senate to take your race track money.'"

When the Silverdome vote came up again on reconsideration Wednesday, Skrel and Kirksey voted against cutting the money out of the bill. The city of Pontiac uses the \$800,000 to pay off bonds.

SKREL WOULDN'T say she was

pressured to change her vote, but added, "that implication of Livonia's money for the race track being in jeopardy" was there.

"There are certain side shows always going on," she said.

"If I had no race track (in the district), I probably would have thought differently about the Silverdome issue. We did make that agreement long before I was here."

The Silverdome subsidy and state aid to cities with race tracks comes from the same pot — state taxes on race track betting. Besides Livonia and Northville, the current bill has \$800,000 for Hazel Park, \$162,000 for Jackson and \$127,000 for Saginaw.

Kirksey said the annual grant to

Livonia is "not a subsidy, but reimbursement for expenses," primarily police security and traffic control when DRC is open.

"I RESENTED having to vote that way, but I felt obligated to do so," said Kirksey. "It would have been a disaster to Livonia and Northville if those funds had been in jeopardy."

Kirksey's district is the only one in Michigan with two race tracks.

Tom Griffith, a city accountant, said the state money goes in Livonia's general fund. "A piece of it goes to every activity within that general fund," he said.

Livonia Police Chief Robert Turner said the city has "22 to 30" officers as-

signed to DRC daily when it's open, including "four to seven" plain-clothes officers inside.

"They would have a lot of thefts if we weren't there," Turner said. He estimated that cost of police service alone approaches \$300,000 annually, including time spent by officers processing arrests and appearing in court.

"When it's empty, we still keep patrolling it," he added. Turner said the track is usually open eight months a year.

Other western Wayne legislators supported removal of the Silverdome subsidy. They include state Reps. John Bennett, D-Redford, Thomas Brown, D-Westland, William Keith, D-Garden City, and Roy Smith, R-Saline.

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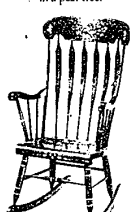
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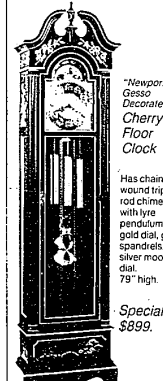
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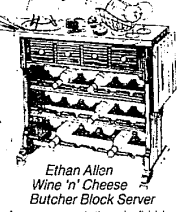
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