

2 plans would cut legislative session

By Mike Scanlon
staff writer

To the list of unanswerable questions — such as, how high is up? — we can now add: How long is long enough?

In this instance, how long should it take for the Michigan Legislature to do its work and head home?

Two markedly different men are marketing two broadly similar constitutional plans to trim session lengths. Both would give Michigan a part-time legislature.

THE MEN are state Sen. Donald Bishop, R-Rochester, and Shiawassee County Drain Commissioner Robert Tisch, best known as the state's tax-cut guru.

In recent years, both the length of legislative sessions and the number of approved laws and resolutions have soared. For example, the 1977 session of the 79th Legislature lasted virtually all year, stretching from Jan. 12 to Dec. 29 over 133 actual session days. In that time, 319 new laws were approved.

The 1978 session of the 79th Legislature was one day longer, convening Jan. 11 and ending Dec. 29, spanning 127 actual session days during which 642 new laws were approved.

Michigan is one of only 15 states which imposes no time restriction on legislative sessions.

BISHOP'S PLAN was introduced earlier this year as a Senate resolution, but the 15-year Republican veteran has

begun an attempt to transform it into a citizen initiative after it died in committee. Bishop's plan is both simpler and less far-reaching than the Tisch proposal, but at least it's already in writing.

Bishop's plan would require the Legislature to convene on the second Wednesday of January and adjourn no later than the second Wednesday in May, a maximum 120-day session.

But the plan says nothing about offsetting changes in the lucrative pay scales, pension plans and fringe benefits of legislators.

Both state senators and representatives are paid \$27,000 a year and have a \$5,500 annual expense account. State pension contributions for legislators, which vary annually with actuarial projections, last year reached some \$90,000, or about \$6,700 per legislator. Legislators contribute 7 percent of salary, or \$1,850 a year at current levels.

Pension payments begin at 32 percent of wage with eight years' seniority, and rise to a maximum 64 percent with 16 years' seniority.

TISCH THREATENED in May to begin a session-shortening petition drive July 9 unless the Legislature approved tax cuts which met with his approval. Neither the Legislature nor Tisch acted.

Tisch says he still intends to pursue a shortened session, although he now favors a less-radical plan than he did two months ago.

His original push was for 90-day sessions every other year, with off-year

legislatures limited to 30-day sessions. He says now, however, that he'd prefer 90-day sessions every year with the possibility of a 30-day extension if the governor so orders. The governor's order would have to cite specific topics and the Legislature could deal with no other matters in the special session.

Tisch would also cut pay by putting legislators on day-labor rates. They would be paid \$100 for each session day plus \$50 in expenses. If legislators attend at least 50 percent of all session days, they would receive an additional \$90 a week throughout the year, bringing annual pay to about \$14,000. The Tisch plan would also eliminate the Legislature's subsidized pension plan.

THE PLANS may be broadly similar, but the motives of the men who back them are widely different.

"We do the real crux of what has to be done the last 30 or 40 days, and it doesn't get the scrutiny it should," said Bishop, adding he believes most of any legislature's time is taken up with issues "I would consider to be irrelevant."

Bishop says his plan has languished for nearly four months in committee "because the leadership of both the House and the Senate, Democrats, oppose it."

The issue of pay for legislators, Bishop says, would continue to be under the control of the state's Compensation Commission. Pension funds, he says, "are set by state law, pretty much," although presumably either Bishop's or Tisch's proposed constitutional amend-

ment would take precedence over any state law.

BISHOP OPPOSES a 90-day session, saying he believes it's a bit too short. "I think you need the 120 days," he says. "The budget process requires a little longer than 90 days. That's not to say we couldn't do it if we had to."

Bishop has so far received little response from a letter he recently mailed to about 50 groups statewide, but he said he didn't expect much response quickly.

"The response I've gotten . . . Most of the organizations I've sent the letter to have indicated they can't make the decision themselves. They have to consult with their executive board."

BISHOP'S LANGUAGE "isn't going to deliver what I want done," said Tisch. "It's written by a politician for a politician. I want a part-time, citizen legislature. Bishop won't do that."

"And I think he's in trouble with the drive because he won't do anything."

Tisch, who admits to a continuing interest in running for governor, said he decided to include provisions for the \$90 weekly payment year-round "because I have to bleed for (legislators) because they say they have to answer the phone so often when they're home."

A part-time legislature would allow elected representatives to retain greater contact with their constituents, Tisch said.

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