

Oakland (just barely) backs modern transit

OAKLAND COUNTY commissioners have decided that this is indeed the 20th century and that we'd better get ready for the 21st. The vote was 14-9.

It put Oakland behind the revised 1990 plan of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority. The trade-off was that suburban Oakland and Macomb received more east-west bus lines, and SENTA agreed to put much less of the Woodward corridor rapid transit line underground.

IT MEANS THAT SENTA can deal with Washington for federal aid with something resembling a united front. Officially, at least, the major components of the southeastern Michigan region, as well as the SENTA board, support one plan.

It also means the region can prepare for some kind of referendum on a tax plan to support public transportation.

There is a certain amount of gnawing over when such an election should be held. Some commissioners are deathly afraid of having such a proposal on the ballot at the same time they must run for renomination or re-election. It would mean they would have to take a forthright stand. Taking a forthright stand is tough for some politicians.

Of the local delegation, these commissioners voted on the side of progress and in favor of the SENTA plan: Democrats James Doyon of Madison Heights and Larry Pernick of Southfield; Republicans Sue Kuhn of Clawson, Lillian Moffitt of Bloomfield Township and John Olsen of Huntington Woods.

These commissioners were negative: Republicans William Caddell of Northville, John Calandrelli of Westland, Marilyn Gosling of Bloomfield Hills and George Berton Jackson of Birmingham.

And these were absent: Democrat Alex Perinoff of Southfield (in hospital) and Republicans Thomas Law of West Bloomfield, John McDonald of Farm-

ington and Robert Page of Birmingham.

EVEN THOUGH OUR reporters have listened to all the debates, we get the uncomfortable feeling that the "anti" arguments aren't really coming out.

We hear about the high cost of digging a tube for a subway. Yet we don't hear that buses are far more expensive to operate per passenger mile. We don't hear that the Reagan administration is backing away from operating subsidies (of which buses would require lots) but retaining its commitment to capital construction (which a subway would require).

We hear the argument about "Who would use it? Who wants to go there?" It is largely the same set of negative arguments we heard prior to 1957 when the Mackinac Bridge was opened.

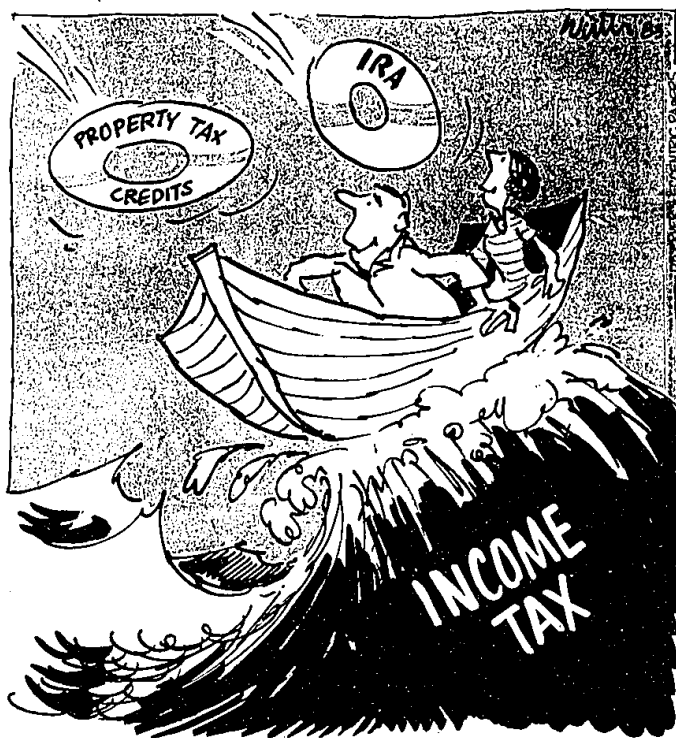
Indeed, the parallels between the Mackinac Bridge and a Woodward rapid transit line are so great that we can't help thinking rapid transit will one day rank with the Straits bridge as the greatest public works project this state has seen in a long while.

AT THE SAME TIME, we must express some regret that SENTA felt forced to place more of the rail line at ground level. Only the downtown portion to Grand Boulevard will be underground in this plan. The earlier plan called for an underground line to Six Mile.

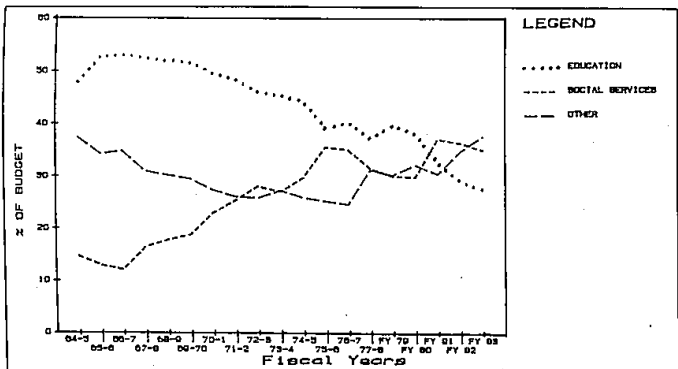
An underground line would be safer for passengers, easier for police to monitor, out of the weather and away from traffic. It would take advantage of the geological fact that Woodward sits on a gravel pile called a terminal moraine; the contractor would be able to drill a hole rather than be forced to blast out rock, as in New York or San Francisco.

But we can accept the compromise. And we give the SENTA board and the Oakland and commissioners who voted "yes" a pat on the back.

Taxpayers' lifesavers



State's social services cost problem: 17 years old



Social services' share of the state budget has tripled since fiscal 1967, from 12.5 to more than 37 percent. Education's share was above 50 percent in the last years of the 1960s but has steadily

declined to a current 27.5 percent. The chart shows general fund operating expenditures, excluding capital outlay and federal aid, in order to reveal the state's own priorities.

MORE THAN any other group, educators were responsible for lobbying through the recent state income tax increase of an additional 1.75 percent.

Educators were the thrust behind the 150-member Committee to Save Michigan. After you get beyond the Max Fishers and Stanford Stoddards, you see the group was dominated by the presidents of the state universities and the Michigan Education Association.

Wayne State's David Adamany and Michigan's Harold Shapiro took to the stump with speech after speech, mailing after mailing, about how higher education, in particular, would be whittled into inferiority without a dose of new money.

They were correct as far as they went. They are getting the new money, retroactive to Jan. 1.

Unfortunately, they failed to go far enough. They failed to point out that the drainage of money from education is a phenomenon that is almost a generation old. And unless something is done to halt that drainage, in another few years the educators will be beating on the doors for another tax increase.

THE BRUTAL FACTS, as you can see from the chart, are these:

• Education's share of Michigan's general fund revenues has declined from a steady 52 percent in the late 1960s to only about 27.5 percent in 1983. This cannot be blamed on a decline in enrollments because education has had to turn to two other sources for its money. Most school districts have,



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turned to the property owner for more tax money and have benefitted mightily from the super-inflation of real estate prices. Colleges have jacked up tuitions to the point where tuitions have replaced gasoline as one of the most inflationary items in the consumer price index.

• Social services have increased steadily as a percentage of state-raised money from 12.1 percent in 1966-67 to 16.5 percent in 1967-68 to 25.4 percent in 1971-72 to 35.6 percent in 1975-76 to a current level of more than 37 percent.

Legislators and lobbyists are dead wrong when they blame the soaring social services caseload on the current depression. From the chart, you can see that social services spending has been steadily increasing for 17 fiscal years. The social services, spending line leaps up in bad years, but it never declines very far in good years.

In short, the situation is out of control. Worse, nobody is doing much about it.

"SOCIAL SERVICES" covers a multitude of programs.

One is Medicaid, a program of aid for medical expenses of welfare recipients and other medical indigents. According to a legislative staffer, this item has been rising at a rate of 12 to 15 percent a year — steadily.

While it may be possible to go after cheaters and frauds, one gets the uncomfortable feeling that that is a nickel-and-dime solution. The big factor here is rising medical costs, not the poor folks being served.

In the late gubernatorial primary, state Sen. Edward Pierce, D-Ann Arbor, talked hard on this topic. Perhaps it should be pursued.

A second factor is joblessness and the number of people who have exhausted their unemployment benefits. That, in time, will correct itself.

A third factor is showing up in our belated census tallies. It is the number of families headed by a single parent, usually a woman. In southeastern Michigan, the number of families headed by a woman rose 72 percent from 1970 to 1980 while the number of married-couple families actually fell 1.5 percent.

NOW, TAKING INTO consideration that poverty is increasingly a phenomenon of single mothers, we may be getting a handle on the situation.

What to do about it? You've got me. I'm a facts and numbers man, not a sociologist.

It's quite clear, however, that the combination of soaring medical costs and the disintegration of families is draining the state budget money that used to go for schools, colleges, state police and those good things.

We haven't solved our problem by raising the state income tax from 4.8 percent to 6.35 percent. We won't solve it by shifting to a sales tax. We are going to have to get social services under control.

Blanchard's job now is to hold down costs

NOW THAT Gov. James Blanchard has cleared his first big hurdle by securing legislative approval of an income tax increase, he and his administration should find ways to deal with the problems that make a tax increase necessary.

It would be easy to focus on any number of projects that would enhance the reputation of the new administration — jobs programs, for example. It would be easy to shy away from dealing with the complexities involved in evaluating how state government money is spent.

But now is precisely the time for the new administration to judge the programs the state is paying for and to determine where scarce resources can be saved.

There may be little sentiment within the administration for talking about cutting social welfare costs at a time of high unemployment, but that phase of the budget accounts for 37 percent of the state budget, and increasingly the public is becoming restive about these costs.

THERE IS ALSO the enormous task of evaluating the condition of our colleges and universities, which are declining in enrollments, money and reputation.

Each college and university believes it should have certain prerogatives in developing and maintaining programs, but a serious coordinated effort must be made to consider elimination of duplicating services if we are to save money.

As has been shown, the state formula for aiding local school districts has not worked in ensuring equitable opportunities. About 14 percent of the state



general fund budget goes to K-12 school districts. The governor is at this point a successful politician because he secured legislative approval of his bail-out tax increase. Nevertheless, much of the populace is disturbed. No matter that the previous governor also fought long and hard for a tax increase, Blanchard is the man who promised "jobs, jobs, jobs" before the election and delivered a tax increase after the election.

The tendency might be for the governor to forego the rigors of battling over budgetary matters and long-term fiscal solutions to try to restore his image as a Democrat who is really and primarily concerned about unemployment and the creation of jobs.

ONE DIFFICULTY of Blanchard's present situation is that there is a big difference between running for political office and running a state government. He worked as a campaigner to create an enduring image of Blanchard as the man who would cure the state's general economic health and pro-

vide jobs for the unemployed.

In fact, a state governor can do little to restore the health of a state's economy — state government hasn't the power — or to actually create jobs. What he can do is work at creating the kind of climate that attracts businesses and business investment.

Blanchard has made the right start in this direction by appointing three major committees of government, business and labor leaders to deal with unemployment and job training, but he has not helped the state's high-tax image.

THE GOVERNOR will be able, no doubt, to do other things to try to deal with the unemployment problems caused by a declining national and even world economy and an even worse local economy.

But his real business as governor should be to work at making state government more efficient. This means taking head-on the problems involved in getting under control the burgeoning costs of social welfare, fashioning an educational system which will eliminate costly duplications while maintaining reputable institutions and working at eliminating the inequities in the state's K-12 school systems.

To the extent that he shows progress in these areas, he will be succeeding in his charge as governor. To the extent that he delays and becomes involved in other issues, he will be losing the opportunity to make meaningful progress.