

Senate shelves 'Lifeline'

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Suburban state senators joined forces across party lines in a move to repeal the "Lifeline" program, under which low-consumption households are charged lower electric rates per kilowatt hour.

"It was touted as an energy conservation program. It has failed," said state Sen. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, sponsor of the repeal measure.

"Lifeline was a mistake," agreed Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills.

AFTER DEBATING it Wednesday, the Senate Thursday approved Fessler's amendment to HB 4975, one of a package of bills dealing with energy conservation, theft and avoidance of lawsuits to the poor.

The vote was 24-11. It was supported by Republicans Fessler, Doug Cruce of Troy, Robert Geake of Northville and Rudy Nichols of Waterford and Democrats Faxon and Patrick McCollough of Dearborn. Minority Leader William Faust, D-Westland, was absent.

The bill will be returned to the House of Representatives for concurrence in the Fessler amendment. The House version retained Lifeline.

Under Lifeline, households were divided into brackets depending on whether they used 500 kwh or less (47 percent), 500-1,100 kwh (42 percent) or more than 1,100 kwh (11 percent), according to Fessler's figures. The state Public Service Commission was required to use the Lifeline concept in setting electric rates.

OPPONENTS of Fessler's bill also crossed party lines — from Lana Pollack, D-Ann Arbor, to Paul Henry, R-Grand Rapids.

"If you repeal Lifeline," said Pollack, "Consumers Power says 60 percent of their customers will see an increase in their bills. Detroit Edison

'It was touted as an energy conservation program. It has failed. It was touted as helping senior citizens. It has failed.'

— state Sen. Richard Fessler
R-West Bloomfield

says 52 percent of their customers will see an increase."

She speculated the Legislature would see "a highly organized campaign by senior citizens groups against repeal."

"Lifeline was meant to be a conservation program, not an income-transfer program," said Henry, who opposed outright repeal of the program.

BUT FESSLER and Faxon, who had voted for Lifeline when it was started in 1981, insisted the program had backfired. It was designed to benefit low-income people and senior citizens who presumably use small amounts of electricity.

"Higher-income people, per capita, use less power than senior citizens," said Fessler. "They're out working. Two working persons in a family use less electricity. Senior citizens are at home with the power on and the heat up. Lifeline has not benefited the people we thought it would."

Fessler said mobile home dwellers frequently

live in parks with master meters and find themselves outside the Lifeline system.

"We can resolve the problem for those who are needy by direct grants through the Department of Social Services," he said.

FAXON, WHOSE district includes many Southfield and Farmington Hills apartment dwellers, agreed, saying, "I'm sorry I voted for it."

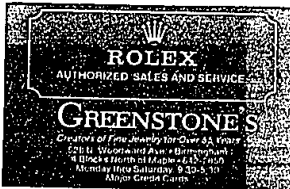
"Older people in apartments can't open their windows in summer. They have to run their air conditioners all day," he said.

He said homeowners who had a room to their houses and heat it electrically find themselves in a higher energy usage bracket, and their electric costs skyrocketed.

Cruce noted that a companion bill directs DSS to target houses in need of weatherization to cut their heating costs.

"We have been assisting households on AFDC (aid to families with dependent children) and had no control over heating costs. This is an effort to check runaway costs," he said.

The companion measure (HB 4970) also gradually scales down the amount of natural gas for which DSS will pay. In the 1984-85 fiscal year, the cap will be 350,000 cubic feet per assisted household; in 1985-86, it will be cut to 300,000 cubic feet; then to 250,000 and 200,000. DSS may, however, ask the Legislature to raise the caps when winters are colder than normal by 5 percent or more.



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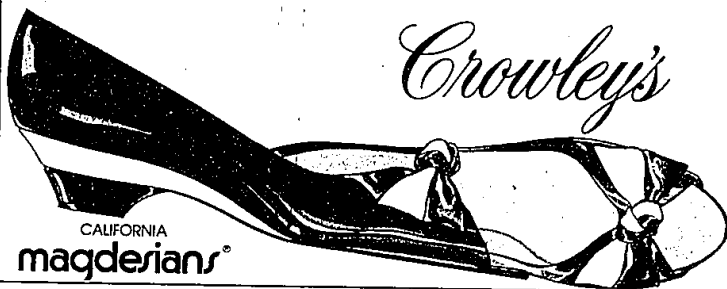
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Conducting the workshop is Shirley Aune, M.A., Continuum Center adjunct staff member and director of family counseling and education for Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

"Many people don't realize they can control both their feelings and behavior, and that the paralyzing effects of sadness can be significantly reduced using simple techniques," she explained.

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