Senate GOP agenda: Make state competitive

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Since taking control of the Michigan Senate in spring after two Democrats were recalled by voters, Republicans have pushed a long list of pet bills through committees and negotiated for other goals.

But unlike Democratic Gov. James Blanchard, who announced his program in a "State of the State" message, the GOP Senate caucus never has taken time to outline its battle plan.

"Our caucus is competition and market-oriented. We're committed to making Michigan more economically competitive," said Senate Majority Leader John Engler of Mt. Pleasant, summing up the Republican agenda in an interview last week.

"It was apparent to us Michigan had lost its competitive edge. But instead of doing something, we were sitting around saying 'Woe is us.' The governor was talking about 'jobs, jobs, jobs,' but that had to include a legislative agenda."

While the GOP holds a 20-18 edge in the Senate, Democrats still have 63-47 control of the House and control of the governor's chair.

IN HIS office on the third floor of the Capitol Building, Engler listed key bills and how they fit the GOP pattern:

- Taxes. Republicans won agreement to move the next income tax cut deadline forward to Sept. 1, a month earlier than Blanchard proposed, and to put a definite date (October 1987) on returning the tax rate to 4.6 percent. "We argued that while we had to look at deficits, we shouldn't pile up sizable surpluses." Putting a schedule on reducing taxes meant improving the state's competitive position, in the GOP view.
- Education. "It's our single highest priority on our competitive agenda," Engler said. "All the money in welfare is not a solution but a remedial effort." He faults the Legislature over the years for its "disinvestment in education" and shifting of spending to social services. The compromise tax reduction package negotiated June 21 by legislative leaders includes $63.5 million more for kindergarten through 12th-grade education and $12 million more for state colleges, he said proudly.
- Unemployment compensation. A bill to restore the "waiting week" before receipt of unemployment benefits passed the Senate on virtually a straight party-line vote. Besides saving at least $50 million, he said, it will put Michigan in line with most other states.
- Workers compensation. After Democratic Attorney General Frank Kelley reversed years of precedents and ruled the Michigan State Accident Fund is a state agency, Republicans pushed forward a bill to put it in the private enterprise sphere. If the fund is a state agency, the state has some say in how the money in the fund is invested. The bill taking the agency back from the state was reported out of committee, and Engler hopes for action in fall. "We should cut it loose, get it out of the state's nest and into the marketplace," he said.
- Financial deregulation. Republicans want to remove limitations on branch banking and interstate banks. They also want to deregulate interest rates, which Engler says causes confusion to lenders because expiration dates are always extended. Many small-loan companies that closed down their Michigan operations blamed state regulations.

Sen. John Engler
more oversight

IN THE TAX compromise, state Sen. R. Robert Geake, R-Northville, found his pet bill — to stop general assistance to able-bodied adults for six months — dropped in the shuffle.

"I am personally disappointed," he said. It was "traded away in exchange for a date certain on the tax rollback and more educational funding," he said. In addition, although Republicans supported his bill, it wasn't part of the party agenda, Geake said.

One of the most senior Republicans in the Senate, Geake has served with three Republican leaders and calls Engler "the best of the three. He's tireless. He is constantly meeting with people. He has command of a wide variety of issues, which is unusual for a legislator. And he's very innovative."

THERE'S NO "Detroit" item on the Republican agenda, Engler said.

Although GOP whip Richard Fessler of West Bloomfield is sponsor of bills to bring the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department under regional control, Engler considers that a "regional" matter for both Democrats and Republicans in the southeastern counties to decide — not a Republican position.

Nor is there a Republican position on such issues as paying for the zoo or relations with the state-financed Detroit Institute of Arts. "That's still developing," Engler said.

The Detroit "equity" aid bill, developed in the mid-1970s, shouldn't simply be continued "and never reviewed and questioned," he said. A recent battle developed over an effort to cut some of the $38 million Detroit is receiving and allocate to other cities. Engler put it in perspective:

"Sen. Connie Binsfeld, R-Maple City, argued that while Detroit is the largest city in the state, other cities have regional responsibilities — Grand Rapids, Flint . . ."

AND IF DETROIT Mayor Coleman Young uses street language to describe outstate legislators, Engler refuses to respond in kind.

"We pay virtually no attention to the fact that the personality of the mayor of Detroit is different from the personality of the mayor of Saginaw. Decisions should not be based on personalities.

"Our central theme is that Detroit and any other city has to function according to accepted rules."

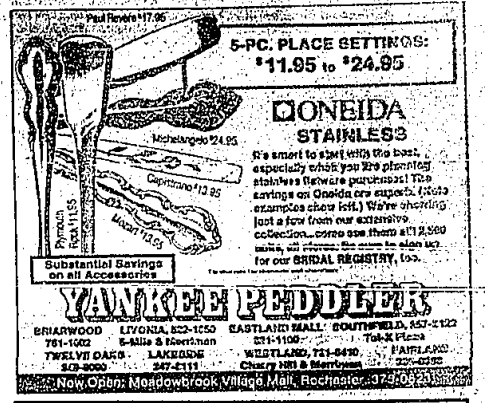
Senate Republicans believe that "a weakness of the '70s was that so many employees and programs were added that the Legislature didn't do enough in the way of oversight," he said.

In the tax compromise, Republicans had forced Blanchard and the Democrats to admit the Department of Social Services had been underfunded by $60 million, Geake said. "The Senate will no longer be a rubber stamp."

ENGLER, 35, has spent most of his working life in the Legislature. Starting in 1970, a year before earning his law degree, he was elected to four terms in the House and is in his second term as a senator.

In a statehouse romance, he married fellow Rep. Colleen House of Bay City. Mrs. Engler, after moving to Mt. Pleasant, won a House district there in 1982.

Engler earned his bachelor of science degree in agricultural economics from Michigan State University, but he has made an effort to get acquainted with Detroit.



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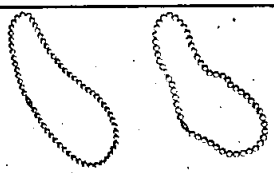

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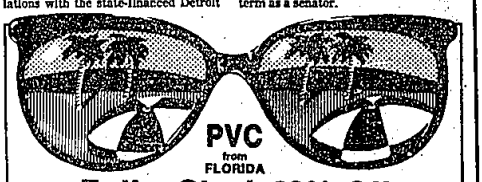

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