

State study silent on M-275, Northwestern

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Anyone waiting for the Blanchard Administration to say stop or go to the M-275 and Northwestern freeway projects in Oakland County will have to wait a little longer.

But James P. Pitz, director of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), did give one clue as he unveiled a 15-year projection of road, passenger and port needs in the state. "We have shifted to preservation" instead of new routes in outlining transportation needs, Pitz told a news conference in Lansing Tuesday.

ASKED ABOUT the long-delayed M-

275, which would follow the Haggerty Road corridor from I-496 in Novi to I-75 at Clarkston, Pitz replied:

"This study does not speak to any specific project. Whether that's M-275, Northwestern or US-31 on the west side of the state will be the product of future study."

The two controversial freeway extensions were cancelled by the old State Highway Commission in 1976, revived later in the '70s and placed on hold when Gov. James Blanchard took office in 1983.

Oakland County political and business leaders favor the projects as essential to economic development. Former Gov. William Milliken and Detroit

political leaders see them as wasteful "urban sprawl."

WHAT PITZ unveiled was a batch of dollar numbers indicating the state has cut its estimate of needs by half since the last time it conducted a similar study in 1980. The three highlights:

- The 1980 study placed transportation needs at \$51.5 billion; the new study at \$27.6 billion. The study said the reduction was made by "technical refinements in the needs assessment process and improvements in the inventory process."

- The new study increased the emphasis on preservation, or maintenance, from 65 percent of the total to 74 percent. The percentage going to new construction and new programs was cut from 12 percent to 8 percent.

- Beginning in 1987, revenues will be insufficient to meet even the lower level of need because more fuel-efficient automobiles will generate a declining amount of gasoline taxes. Over the 12-year period from 1983-94, he said, the shortfall will amount to \$5 billion.

"Transportation revenue can never pace inflation," Pitz said.

PITZ NOTED the study committee — composed of MDOT staff members and representatives from county road

groups, bus groups, rail interests and senior citizens — had recommended no method of closing the \$5 billion revenue shortfall.

State Sen. Rick Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, was unpleasantly surprised at the projection of a revenue shortfall. "We passed a two-cent-a-gallon gasoline tax increase in 1982," said Fessler, chairman of the State Affairs and Transportation Committee.

Road needs are met through a 15-cent-a-gallon tax on gasoline and a vehicle weight tax. The revenue is parceled out by formula between MDOT, county road commissions, cities and villages.

Local governments may supplement these revenues from their municipal budgets. In addition, the federal government contributes about 35 percent of all transportation money spent in Michigan.

PITZ SAID something must be done about public transportation in the metropolitan Detroit region, but he stopped short of endorsing a sales tax increase proposal advanced by the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority.

"It (SEMTA) is one of the few systems in the country with no tax support," he said. "The status quo on public transportation in the metropolitan area is not acceptable."

Pitz said SEMTA and the Detroit Department of Transportation need to reorganize — a term he prefers to "merge." And he said a single agency should be in charge of "fiscal oversight" within the region.

Under state law, SEMTA and DDOT are supposed to merge, but Detroit Mayor Coleman Young has balked at surrendering its bus system to regional

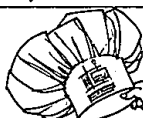
control without guarantees of service. The Detroit city budget subsidizes DDOT, but SEMTA has no such financial underpinning. Young points out:

DDOT operates a bus system within Detroit city limits. SEMTA operates a bus system in the suburbs, with express service to downtown Detroit, and is building a Downtown People Mover automated electric car system.



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— James P. Pitz
MDOT director



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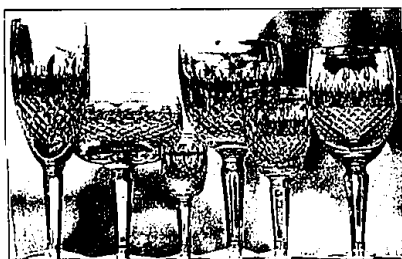
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