

Drive for highway expansion under way

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Even as James D. Pitz puts together a freeway expansion plan, he is fending off a raid on the tax revenue going to his Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT).

First, the MDOT director must put together a 10-year highway expansion and redevelopment program, which could include the proposed M-275. It probably will include another lane for I-696 in Southfield and Farmington Hills.

Second, townships will be asking the Legislature for more state tax money in the local road formula — probably at the expense of state highways.

"If we confine ourselves solely to preservation, we will not be responding to the public's needs," said Pitz, pointing on a map to West Bloomfield Township and the growth area of western Oakland County.

He leaves no doubt that Michigan's 9,500 miles of freeways and state trunklines need to be expanded, not just rebuilt as they wear down.

Pitz, who left Illinois to head MDOT when James Blanchard became governor in 1983, sees money as the chief obstacle to M-275, the long-planned, once-cancelled freeway across Oakland County that would connect I-275 in Novi and I-75 at Davisburg.

"If you ask 'is it officially dead?' the answer is no," he said in an interview last week. "It's in a package of \$2.5 billion worth of new freeway projects like US-131 and other unfinished routes. We don't have the funding for most."

"I've been discussing I-275 with local people who see it as one of the priorities in the area. The current SEMCOG regional plan identifies it as a demand corridor."

Pitz said I-275 would have to be a fairly large project accomplished in a few chunks with big infusions of dollars.

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James D. Pitz

"A multiple-lane facility (such as a state highway) you could build a mile at a time. A freeway you have to build from interchange to interchange," he said.

"We're scheduled to make a presentation to the Transportation Commission in the fall — a 10-year expansion plan."

A MAJOR battle could develop, how-

ever, when the Legislature renews gasoline and weight taxes that are due to expire this fall. "My guess is it (the 1982 tax increase) will be extended," Pitz said.

The real battle — "it hasn't come into the open" — will be over how the money is split between three kinds of users:

- MDOT, which gets 39.4 percent.
- Counties, whose road commissions get 39.4 percent and take care of roads in townships.
- Cities and villages, which get 21.4 percent.

"Some urban counties have the audacity to argue for more money at the expense of trunklines," said Pitz, mentioning no names. "Townships don't own any roads. Townships say that county level priorities don't get to local roads."

"The concept of townships' being shorted — I don't buy into that," Pitz said. He feels that townships which feel the need to deal with infrastructure

and/or social problems should incorporate as cities, which have broader powers to deal with those needs.

Michigan puts a bigger chunk of its road money into the local system than neighboring states, he said. In contrast, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio put 55-60 percent of their funds into state roads compared to Michigan's 39.4.

THE LONG-AWAITED I-696 (Reuther) freeway across southern Oakland and Macomb counties should have its "missing link" built by 1989, but Pitz sees the need for improvements in an existing segment.

The MDOT chief said I-696 in Farmington Hills and Southfield needs an additional lane and two more intersections. In a stretch of eight miles, it has only one — at Orchard Lake Road. Pitz said one is needed on the east, perhaps at Inkster or Middlebelt, and a second to the west, possibly at Haggerty.

That will require coordination with Oakland County on improvement of its "mile" roads. "You've gotta do something on the mile roads. Local traffic has to be distributed. You can't just expand freeways," he said.

In his first two years on the job, Pitz has overseen the rebuilding of 1,400 miles of existing roads. Of Michigan's 9,500 miles of state roads, he wants to target the 4,000 miles which are most important to 80 percent of the economy for improvements.

ONE REASON for trying to complete the entire I-696 project by 1989, he said, is that the I-94 (Ford) cross-town freeway across the southern end of Detroit needs reconstruction.

The Ford reconstruction would be the second major urban freeway job for southeastern Michigan after the Lodge, which will be rebuilt in two stages in 1986-7. Pitz announced last week that the Lodge's northbound and southbound lanes will be shut down for three months each in 1987 for repaving.

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