

Opinion

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Roadwork State plans just a start

HE KEPT his word.

Gov. James Blanchard, through Michigan Department of Transportation Director James Pittz, has unveiled a "blueprint for action" — \$76 million in improvements to ease current and anticipated traffic congestion along the I-696/Haggerty Road corridor.

With Election Day fast approaching, the timing of the action blueprint wasn't surprising. It's welcome, nonetheless.

For residents of Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield and other communities along the north-south thoroughfare, a near-gridlock at rush hour has threatened one of the area's major lures, its quality of life.

Political motivations aside, Blanchard deserves credit for recognizing that Oakland County's economic boom has caused road woes far worse than what local taxpayers should have to shoulder alone.

MDOT's five-point, five-year plan includes widening I-696 to eight lanes from Telegraph to I-275, improving the Orchard Lake Road interchange and adding three new interchanges — near Inkster, Drake and Haggerty.

WILDFIRE GROWTH has occurred since I-696 opened in 1964 to serve the rural western reaches of Oakland County. Average daily traffic volume near Orchard Lake Road has grown from 21,000 daily to 67,000. By 1990, it's expected to reach 97,000. Telling figures, indeed.

But don't get overly excited. Anticipated improvements won't be in place until 1991. By then, who knows what new roadblocks may have surfaced. And who knows how many federally promised dollars will have been delivered.

The sketchy details accompanying MDOT's announcement, moreover, present a problem for Farmington Hills officials trying to coordinate a host of new local road improvements. Says Assistant City Manager David Call: "We want to be ready for their improvements so they can tie into ours in the

least disruptive way possible."

Particularly pivotal is the MDOT plan's effect on Haggerty, a two-lane county road traversing a hotbed for commercial and residential development.

The plan calls for widening Haggerty from I-96 to Maple to ease congestion around the proposed interchange west of Haggerty. The onus clearly is on the state to assure the widening is sufficient when Haggerty becomes a feeder for I-96 and I-696 as well as I-275.

WHERE to put the interchange hasn't been decided. But it makes sense to put it near 12 Mile, a major east-west artery through Farmington Hills and Novi, rather than less-traveled 13 Mile.

Meanwhile, what about the rest of the Haggerty corridor, south of Grand River near Eight Mile and north of Maple into the lakes area? The proposed improvement could be outmoded the day it's finished.

Unquestionably, continued cooperation by the state, the county, Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield and other bordering communities would go a long way toward solving problems involving the entire corridor.

Instead of extending I-275 northward — an idea shelved years ago after wilderness protection became a key issue — what may well be needed is an environmentally sensitive parkway or boulevard along the Haggerty corridor to M-59.

BUT A super highway, we're not talking about. That would draw a stream of developers to the corridor, negating the effect of any road improvements.

It also would threaten residential property values by driving away prospective home buyers fearful of stop-and-go conditions.

Yes, MDOT's announcement was a significant move toward smoother traffic flow. But it's only a beginning.

— Bob Sklar

Worst tailgaters in SE Michigan

AN EXPERT, AS they say at business conferences, is a speaker who's more than 100 miles from home.

Having driven more than 100 miles from home, in all four directions, within the past few years, I guess I qualify.

The scuttlebutt is true. Southeastern Michigan drivers are the worst, the rudest, the most obsessed.

You already knew they were heavy-footed because of those federal studies on the average speeds on our freeways. For a while it looked as if we might lose our federal road aid because of our speed.

In the western plains states where there are more antelope than motor vehicles, 55 mph is a joke. In southeastern Michigan, 55 is a joke during rush hours in urbanized areas.

TAIL-GATING is the most characteristic phenomenon — the practice of following a car within a quarter of a car length at 62 mph, edging to the left and then passing before the car ahead has swung into the right lane.

It's intimidation, it's reckless, and it's a southeastern Michigan habit.

Take I-80 east of Toledo, and tailgating disappears by the time you're halfway to Cleveland. You see almost none of it around Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

Take I-94 west, and it stops before you reach Battle Creek.

A year ago, the practice was confined to young men. Now, young women are doing it. Women's lib, perhaps.

CENTER-LANE driving is a favorite bad habit of Michiganders, though the practice isn't confined to us.

The rules say that normal traffic uses the right lane, and the center lane is for passing. The British observe the rule religiously on their motorways.

On I-75, particularly the traffic bound for Florida, it's the opposite.



Tim Richard

Frequently I've counted 18 or 19 cars (many with Michigan plates) in the center lane for every one in the right lane.

As near as I can figure out, Michigan drivers are abnormally fearful they'll get stuck behind a slow driver in the right lane and be boxed in by passing traffic, so they travel in the passing lane.

There's sound reason for that fear. When the drivers in the passing lane are tailgating, as many are, there's only 10 feet of space between cars. At 70 mph, it's kinda hard to squeeze in.

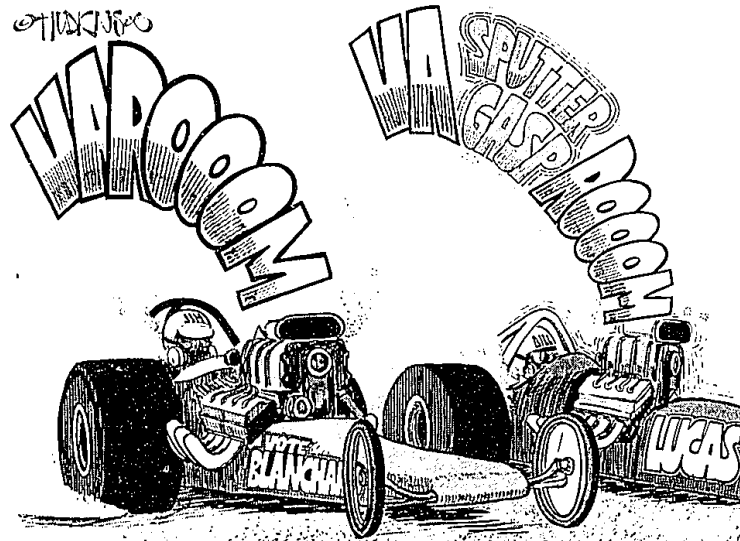
GETTING AWAY from southeastern Michigan roads subjects one to something akin to culture shock. I've already mentioned the way British drivers use the center lane only for passing.

Local traffic in Florida reaches a high level of politeness and consideration. The reason is obvious: There are many retirees with slower reactions and dimming eyesight.

At first your reaction is self-defense, almost a matter of condescension to the older folks. Just a day or two, and your attitude changes to a good feeling inside — a warm feeling that you and others are just being nice to one another. You find yourself smiling more to the other guy, gritting your teeth less, saying inaudibly: "Plenty of room. I'm in no rush."

You don't dare try that on I-275 in Livonia.

Or on I-75 from Grayling to Troy on a Sunday afternoon — that's maniac's alley.



Preserving a tradition

Metropolitan Detroit never was nor is it in any danger of having just one newspaper.

Don't you believe it.

Metropolitan Detroit has many, many newspapers — even if you have been led to believe recently that we just have two and are in danger of having just one — if the government doesn't cave in and allow the two metro papers to operate in tandem.

It's called a JOA.

For the journalistic unwashed, that's short for Joint Operating Agreement. For the newspapers involved, it means all departments except the news side will be combined.

For you the reader and retailers it could mean something quite different. In every city where a JOA is in operation, it costs — you.

BASICALLY, TIMES are changing and some newsfolks haven't caught on. Instead of letting the reader and advertiser decide which newspapers deserve to survive, they seek a government-sanctioned monopoly to save them.

Those of us in the suburban newspaper business have struggled hard to establish ourselves. We did it on our own — without government intervention. Your support has made us successful. The nice thing — the really nice thing



crackerbarrel debate
Steve Barnaby

about metropolitan Detroit — is its newspapers.

Besides the two metro papers, at least five other daily newspapers exist. In the six county area, 81 weekly and twice-weekly newspapers do business.

NOT EVERY TOWN has such a proud newspaper tradition.

But the tradition has survived because we realize that none of our publications is sacred. We aren't the Holy Grail. Neither is the Detroit News or the Detroit Free Press.

Newspapers exist to serve the public. If the readers and advertisers choose to withhold their support, another newspaper will fill the void.

JOAs, while ostensibly saving a second editorial voice, actually tend to thwart competition and put smaller newspapers out of business. Readers actually end up with fewer editorial

voices — and it costs them more.

Nationwide, joint newspapers charge 25-35 cents for a daily newspaper and \$1 for a Sunday issue. The two major dailies in this market charge 15 and 20 cents daily. A Sunday issue costs you 75 cents.

ADVERTISING RATES could also increase.

A national study reveals that the average cost of a line of display advertising costs \$11.21 for locally competing newspapers. In cities with JOAs, the cost is \$20.20.

And in many of those cities, advertisers are paying more and getting less. Circulation does drop. In Seattle, it's off by 63,000. In Cincinnati, 51,000 fewer readers read the metro dailies.

And there's a reason for that. For the past 70 years or so, as the suburbs have grown, suburban newspapers have grown and prospered. For every daily newspaper that has gone out of business, a suburban publication has taken its place.

More than 200 newspapers are members of the Suburban Newspaper Association. Two decades ago few of these papers existed.

Times change, so do communities, so do newspapers — many newspaper. It's a fine tradition. So be it.

Politics lacks clarity of sports



Bob Wisler

Iliam Lucas and the nature of the television advertising being put forth by the opposing camps.

SOME REPUBLICANS decry the general appearance of the Lucas campaign. Too nice, too soft, a critic complains. It's not a smashing tackle that leaves the opposing runner sprawled on the ground. It's more like a beauty contest where one well-dressed dude tries to out-articulate another well-dressed dude. It's not the stuff that enables an underdog well behind in the polls to overtake an incumbent governor.

The critics have a point. There may have been a time when pollsters were way off, but not in recent years. There may be some truth to the statement that polls only measure attitude on the day they are conducted and that public opinion can have shifted in between the day the poll is taken and the day the results are announced.

But the polls consistently say Lucas is way behind and with less than five weeks before election day, Lucas' camp must be like the punt receiver waiting for the ball to drop listening to the footsteps of four behemoths bearing down.

Political contests are mostly conjecture. The present race for governor is filled with it. At present, the conjecture is focused on the intensity of the campaign being conducted by and for Wil-

HE NEEDS an issue to carry the campaign. Alas, there is none that will capture the public's imagination. The problem is that despite every candidate's effort to speak to issues that will influence voters, voters pay little attention to most so-called issues. They mostly vote for candidates they feel comfortable with. The governor does not make people feel uncomfortable.

In this political contest, there are seemingly no issues that will enable a candidate to pick up the kind of ground Lucas needs to make up. Even the oft-discussed 38-percent tax increase that Blanchard wrested from the state Legislature in 1983 fizzles as an issue. According to the same Detroit News poll, 50 percent of the voters contacted approved of the tax increase.

WHAT'S LEFT for Lucas to come out with? He can't compare his record in office with Blanchard's because Blanchard's statistics are better. He can say that this is a chance to make history, but are voters really ready to throw out an incumbent governor during relatively good economic times to make history for some future generation to read about?

History would indicate that incumbents don't have to fear being ousted if they stay free of scandal and economic depression. This year doesn't appear to be any exception.

Of course, this is all conjecture.