

Road fee on ballot, becomes political issue

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The \$19 million proposal will be on the Aug. 2 ballot, but it's an open question whether the 27 Oakland County commissioners will campaign for it.

The county board voted 20-4 last week to place before voters a proposal to levy a \$25-per-vehicle registration fee for 10 years. About three-fifths of the revenue would go to the Oakland County Road Commission and the rest to municipalities.

"We all simply hide and say 'let the people decide,'" he was supposed to be leaders," said commissioner Dennis Aaron, D-Oak Park, one of the dissenters.

"A pig in a poke," added commissioner Larry Pernick, D-Southfield,

another no vote, although he had supported the plan in committee.

Also voting no were Democrats Ruel McPherson of Hazel Park and Hubert Price of Pontiac.

Yes votes were cast by 17 Republicans and three Democrats.

THE IDEA of Oakland using the only local-option road money law on the books had widespread support until last week.

Democrats voiced three objections:

• The Aug. 2 date, an amendment passed 18-8 by Republicans. Democrats asked for the Nov. 8 presidential election to allow more campaigning time and assure a larger turnout.

But Republican Larry Crake of Waterford replied, "Most (support) committees will be companies and business people. Business people can move a heckuva lot faster than we in government."

Board chairman Roy Rewold, R-Rochester Hills, said, "If we wait until November, there will be too many other issues on the ballot."

• The board's own failure to endorse the plan. Pernick offered an amendment saying commissioners endorsed a "yes" vote by the public, but it was ruled out of order by Rewold, who was upheld by a 17-7 party line vote.

Democrats voiced three objections: the Aug. 2 election date, the board's failure to endorse it, and the lack of a building plan.

Republicans said the three-man Road Commission should be allowed to finish its town-by-town process of outlining which projects should be undertaken. Transportation committee chairman Jack McDonald, R-Farmington, said he might even vote against the proposal Aug. 2. "I don't benefit my community,"

Republican John Calandro of Novi chided Democrats: "You do a disservice by forcing this amendment today."

• The lack of a construction plan. "We're being asked by non-elected officials (road commissioners) to trust them," said Pernick. "They're asking us to have faith. They're not accountable to anybody — not to the commissioners, not to the executive, not to the voters."

Replied chairman Rewold: "This is one of the few times we've had the Road Commission, the Board of Commissioners and the county executive together on a proposal. I have faith in the Road Commission."

THE DEBATE revealed the complex nature of county government and the county road system.

The Road Commission is a three-member body appointed for staggered six-year terms by the elected Board of Commissioners. After appointment, the road commissioners are pretty much on their own.

Road commission revenue comes mainly from a share of the state gasoline and weight tax. (In Oakland, this has been supplemented in recent years by voluntary "tripartite" projects from the county general fund and local funds.)

As commissioner Thomas Law, R-West Bloomfield, pointed out, "The Road Commission did heavy lobbying" for bills to allow counties to raise local road revenue. "I'm willing to give them the benefit of the

doubt," Law said.

Only one of these bills actually became law. In December the state Legislature passed the \$25 vehicle-registration fee with the proviso that 1) the Board of Commissioners had to put it on the ballot and 2) voters had to approve it.

The Road Commission on Feb. 4 supported the fee increase but lacked power to put the question on the ballot. The Board of Commissioners' only legal function is to place it on the ballot, not necessarily to support it.

Although votes will be tallied countywide, the campaign for voter

approval could wind up being a series of community campaigns. Twin reasons: The Road Commission is canvassing township boards and city councils for their "wish lists." Cities and villages, which get a cut of the revenue, are expected to draw up their own lists to sell voters.

There is an underlying political fear that one Democrat, Ruel McPherson of Hazel Park, voiced in a committee meeting. It's that the fee — a 47¢ burden in a three-car family — could become a political issue in the primary, the only race in which many incumbents face any real challenge.

Insurer asks truck safety bills

AAA Michigan has launched a campaign to get state legislative passage of four major truck-safety bills.

The bills, sponsored by suburban and Detroit lawmakers, are aimed at reducing the number of big truck accidents and a rising death rate among car drivers.

The bills would:

- Restrict trucks to the right lane of all freeways except when passing, entering or leaving, or facing a hazard.

- Require loose loads hauled by all trucks to be covered and contained securely.
- Require all heavy trucks to have an annual safety inspection.
- Increase enforcement of existing traffic laws pertaining to trucks, including speeding and tailgating.

"WE ARE providing postage-paid cards for our members and other motorists to fill out and return to us to show their concern about these issues," said Jack Avignone, president of AAA Michigan, an auto insurer.

"We will sort the signed cards by legislative districts and present them to individual senators and representatives to give them a better understanding of how their constituents feel about improving truck safety laws," he said.

The cards are included in each of the more than one million April Michigan Living magazines. They also are available through the 170 AAA Michigan offices.

Avignone kicked off the AAA campaign at a Lansing news conference where he was joined by seven state lawmakers who recently proposed truck safety legislation. Senate bills are sponsored by William Faust, D-Westland, and Richard D. Fessler, R-Commerce. House bills are sponsored by Reps. Curtis Hertel and Michael J. Bennane, both D-Detroit; W. V. Brotherton, R-Farmington; Shirley Johnson, R-Royal Oak; and Vincent Joe Porreca, D-Trenton.

AVIGNONE cited traffic numbers showing accidents between trucks weighing more than 10,000 pounds and passenger vehicles rose 54 percent between 1982 and 1985. Fatal crashes involving trucks climbed 41 percent. The motorist was the victim in 75 percent of those fatal accidents.

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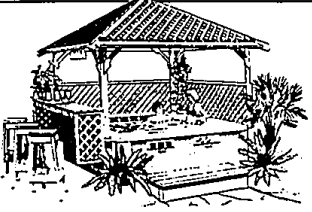
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