

Despite county road woes, fee chances dim

Monday, November 7, 1988 O&E

By Rich Perlberg
staff writer

What costs \$25, would generate \$20 million a year to help ease Oakland County's chronically congested roads and has about as much chance of voter approval as a driver has of missing a Big Beaver traffic jam at rush hour?

It's the Motor Vehicle Registration Fee on Tuesday's ballot.

County road officials, who see the fee as a \$200 million building block in the search for nearly \$1 billion of needed road improvements over 10 years, concede that support and chances of the \$25 per vehicle proposal are slim.

PERHAPS THE best indication of the proposal's non-support is a list of communities actively endorsing it. Even though each stands to gain from the fee, only 10 of Oakland County's 61 cities, villages and townships gave the road commission the endorsement it sought.

Among those not supporting the fee are Farmington Hills, which would receive \$12.4 million if it passes; Rochester Hills, which would receive \$10 million; and Southfield, \$15.6 million.

Birmingham, which would receive \$4.4 million that could assist a traffic plan now under study, went further. City commissioners came out against the proposal because, as one put it, they don't want to make it easier for other people to drive through their city.

Even the county commissioners, who put the issue on the ballot, failed to endorse it, despite an effort by David Moffitt, R-Farmington Hills, who considered seeking a resolution of support before his colleagues convinced him not to.

WHY, SINCE roads are either the first or second most important issue named by most politicians, the opposition? There are at least three reasons:

- It is a regressive and unfair tax. The senior citizen on low income who drives 1,000 miles a year and the heavy truck owner each pays \$25 a year.

- Many politicians say they favor a gasoline tax, which taxes vehicle owners in proportion to their road usage. Others say developers should bear part of the road improvement load. The state Legislature, however, gave counties only the right to seek a vehicle registration fee.

- Others think it unfair because those living outside the county, in-

Oakland road tax: where they stand

Position	Municipality	Road money to be gained by tax
Opposed	Birmingham	\$4.4 million
Support	Franklin	\$490,000
	Troy	\$17.5 million
	West Bloomfield	\$8.4 million
No position (declined road commission request to support)	Beverly Hills	\$2.1 million
	Bingham Farms	\$290,000
	Bloomfield Hills	\$813,000
	Bloomfield Twp.	\$7.9 million
	Farmington	\$1.9 million
	Farmington Hills	\$12.4 million
	Lathrup Village	\$823,000
	Oakland Twp.	\$1.5 million
	Orchard Lake	\$386,000
	Rochester	\$1.4 million
	Rochester Hills	\$10.1 million
	Southfield	\$15.6 million
	Southfield Twp.	\$7,000



Source: Oakland County Road Commission

cluding owners of large fleets, escape the fee even though they are heavy road users.

- It's a tax — period. No one is eager to be labeled as a tax-and-spend politician even though almost everyone concedes new revenue is needed. (Some argue that a fairer distribution of state road money would benefit Oakland County, but few believe a redistribution of the formula is likely.)

The fact that the fee was ill-supported from the beginning made it even less attractive for politicians to spend political bank accounts supporting it.

- Political power plays. Lansing won't give the county the right to raise gasoline taxes locally because it wants to save the source for itself.

Closer to home, County Executive Daniel Murphy wants to bring the road commission, which initiated

this road funding plan, under himself and the Board of Commissioners. Democrats also criticize the road commission structure, saying it is too partisan.

REGARDLESS OF the reasons, the fee has little chance of success, one polls shows.

That means the county is still \$750 million to \$940 million away from meeting road needs that can only get worse, according to road officials.

Some 100,000 jobs have been created in the county since 1983, according to Oakland County Road Commission spokesman John Joy. The road department also estimates that half of the new office growth in Michigan has been in Oakland County.

Such development is healthy, but it brings a price the county and its residents are so far unwilling to pay.



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