

# Suburban senators block school tax plan

By Tim Richard  
staff writer

All seven Observer & Eccentric area state senators Wednesday voted against placing a school tax reform plan on the ballot as the Senate twice rejected it by narrow margins. But supporters vowed to try again — perhaps as early as today — to place the massive plan before voters.

They have until March 16 to get the plan on a May 16 special election. "The problem is the high property tax," said Sen. Doug Cruce, R-Troy, summing up the feelings of most suburban senators that the proposal tried to do too much. "We're trying to solve two problems (with the proposal) — equalize school funding and high property taxes. We can't do it."

It's a confusion to voters, at best; a deception at worst. "BUT THERE were signs that 26 votes — two-thirds of the 38 members — actually favor placing the plan before voters. Wednesday's votes were 21-14 and 22-14. Senate Democratic leader Art Miller of Warren publicly asked majority leader John Engler of Mount Pleasant to deliver 13 Republican votes in exchange for 13 Democratic votes. "We ask him to put up 13 votes. We got a little wisdom since walking the plank in 1983," said Miller, referring to the Democratic-supported income tax increase that resulted in the recall of two Democratic senators. Countered GOP floor leader Phil Arthurhult of Whitehall: "There are

15 votes for it in the minority (Democratic) caucus. There are only 12 votes for it in the Republican caucus. We know all three (Democratic senators) off the floor are yes votes, and two who voted no are yes votes."

Sen. Rudy Nichols, R-Waterford, who opposed the measure, called Miller's remarks "offensive, misleading, insulting, obnoxious, repugnant."

THE SO-CALLED Nye-Oxender plan, named for two rural Republican state representatives who sponsored it, would raise the sales tax two cents, yielding \$1.6 billion, and cut school operating taxes \$1.1 billion — an average of one-third statewide.

In addition, it would allow statewide collection of part of the property tax, resulting in tax base sharing between rich and poor school districts. It would give all districts more money, but poorer districts would be raised most.

Nichols, whose district includes the Rochester area, offered an alternative to cut property taxes and use bigger chunks of the state budget for aid to schools. He lost. Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, criticized the plan for "too much detail." "We're writing a (school aid) formula into the constitution," he said voters wouldn't understand it, adding, "If you don't know, vote no."

Faxon offered a 50-50 plan: a 50 percent increase in the sales tax and a 50 percent cut statewide in school operating property taxes. It failed 17-20.

Cruce said even in the less affluent Madison Heights Lamphere district, homeowners would pay \$50 less in property taxes and \$200 more in sales taxes. In Troy, they would save \$300 on property taxes and pay \$800 more in sales taxes — while schools would benefit only \$250 per child in aid.

Sen. Richard Fessler, R-Commerce, said the real problem is rising property assessments and opposed the plan.

Sen. R. Robert Geake, R-Northville, voted no because "people would pay \$368 million more in sales taxes than they get back in property taxes. It's a tax hike, not just a tax shift." In addition, he said, Michiganans would pay \$95 million more in federal income taxes because the higher sales tax wouldn't be deductible from taxable income, while property taxes are.

Sen. William Faust, D-Westland, unsuccessfully sought amendments to protect Taylor and Westland, which have tax increment finance authorities.

## Senators multiply newsletters

Here's how Michigan's U.S. senators were recorded on major roll call votes in the week ending March 3. There were no House votes during the week.

**SENATORS' MAILING** — By a vote of 50 for and 47 against, the Senate expanded its mailing privileges to permit up to a 500 percent increase in this year's budget for mailing newsletters and other material to constituents.

Michigan Democrats Carl Levin and Donald Riegle voted yes. The vote killed an attempt to block the expansion, under which senators can send up to six self-promotional newsletters annually to each postal patron in their state. That could generate 1.2 billion newsletters nationwide.

### Roll Call Report

The new system will cost taxpayers about \$180 million if fully utilized. Senators spent \$35 million last year on all mail costs.

The vote occurred during debate on legislation (S Res 66) to fund Senate committees in 1989-90, which later became law.

Supporter Wendell Ford, D-Ky., said the expansion would put senators on a par with the House, which in recent years has far outspent the Senate on postage. House members can send up to six newsletters annually.

Opponent Pete Wilson, R-Calif.,

called the fivefold spending increase "a leap so large that it would make the 50 percent pay raise proposal appear almost modest."

**COMMITTEE SPENDING** — By a vote of 62 for and 36 against, the Senate killed (killed) an amendment to cut about \$5 million from the \$106 million budgeted for Senate committees in 1989-90.

This cleared the way for enactment of a measure (S Res 66; see preceding vote) to hike spending for Senate committees by nearly 13 percent over two years, with staff pay

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