

School finance reform: far from dead

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Some questions and reflections on the embattled school tax reform plan:

Q. The Senate rejected a school tax plan last week. What are its chances of winning by the March 17 deadline?

A. Excellent. The House passed it 97-14, with 13 votes more than the needed two-thirds majority.

The Senate vote was 22-14, four short of the needed 26. If history is any guide, the Senate will put together 26 votes by the deadline.

And the yes votes are there. Several Democratic senators took a walk, or voted no, until the Republicans meet them half-way by providing 13 of the needed 26. So far, only 12 Republicans senators have voted yes.

Shouldn't Gov. Jim Blanchard and Senate Majority Leader John Engler exert more leadership?

A. Probably not. Blanchard wants a third term, and Engler is his probable GOP opponent.

If they take opposite sides, they will polarize the issue politically. If they take the same side, the voters, with their trip-'em-up sense of humor, may well reject the plan.

There are times when leaders should lead, and there are times when they should stand back and let the voters' will be done. This is one for the voters.

Special ed science fair at Oakland U

The fourth statewide Michigan Discovery Science Fair for Special Education Students will be held Thursday and Friday in the Oakland Center on the Oakland University campus near Rochester.

It is free to the public. Hours are 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday.

Funding is provided by the Michigan Association of Teachers of Emotionally Disturbed Children, Michigan Association of Learning Disabilities Educators, Science Education for Exceptional Children and Romulus Community Schools.

An awards ceremony will be held 10:15-11:30 a.m. Friday in Room 202 of O'Dowd Hall, according to spokesman Allecia Kobane.

analysis

Q. What's so special about this plan for raising the sales tax 2 cents and cutting property taxes?

A. Actually, it's close to the recommendation of the blue-ribbon Michigan School Finance Commission — remember them? — in September 1987. The Runkel commission recommended a 2-cents hike in the sales tax.

One major difference: It recommended pooling commercial and industrial property taxes statewide, to equalize resources, and letting residential and farm taxes continue to be collected locally.

The current Nye-Oxender plan, known as HJR B, makes a significant modification: nine mills collected statewide, eight mills locally.

A. What's significant about that?

A. For decades, farm districts have been latching to get their hands on the cities' industrial tax base without giving up their rural autonomy.

The Nye-Oxender plan sidesteps this money grab by pooling all property in two pots. Thus, cities and suburbs still have an incentive to recruit industry and commerce.

HJR B also allows local option enrichment taxes: four mills of the property tax, 0.5 percent of the income tax.

'My tax bill'

Q. How will this plan affect my tax bill?

A. You'll have to figure that out yourself. The sales tax hike will bring in \$1.6 billion; the property tax cuts will total \$1.1 billion or more, so there's a tax hike of almost \$500 million as well as a shift. Part of that sales tax hike will be paid by non-resident tourists and business travelers.

Look at your state income tax re-

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turn to see if you got a property tax rebate. If so, the property tax cut may be the same as the rebate, and you'll get no tax cut at all.

Sale taxes aren't deductible on your federal tax form, so that will cost you.

Sen. Doug Cruce of Troy made this point: Lower-income families in richer school districts are likely to get nicked hard. The plan favors poor school districts, not poor people, he said.

Q. Whose advice should I take on voting yes or no?

A. Listen to everybody, but do your own calculations. Almost all school districts will benefit, so expect officials to be either favorable or neutral. Teachers unions will favor it.

Taxpayers in the high-tech belt between Oakland University and the University of Michigan likely will pay more than their districts get

back. The question is: Will the benefit be worth the cost? Three million voters will make three million decisions.

Why a hike?

Q. Why do we need a tax increase anyway?

A. Some say we don't Dick Headlee, the tax fighter from Farmington Hills, says the governor and legislators are failing to give schools \$450 million "guaranteed by the Michigan Constitution."

In real life, the mental health people are clamoring for more and scheduling a rally on the Capitol steps; prosecutors, judges and juries are sending more crooks to prison for longer sentences; Social Services director Pat Babcock wants a welfare increase for his clients; courts want more and more; and you know what environmentalists are saying

about cleaning up toxic wastes.

Sen. Rudy Nichols of Waterford and Rep. John Bennett of Redford have come up with versions of a different idea: As state revenues grow, dedicate a big portion of the increase to education.

Engler's gubernatorial platform will call for increasing the percentage of the state budget for schools.

The fact is that some school districts — in rural areas and non-industrial suburbs — have only a third as much money per student as others. They're hurting.

Q. Can those formulas work?

A. In the real world, budgets are made in the sweaty world of politics, not by mathematical formulas.

Q. Any predictions on how the May 16 election will turn out? Blanchard says it won't fly, and Engler is pessimistic.

A. With reason. Every tax reform proposal for nearly two decades has gone down.

Michigan voters are in three camps: 20 percent want a tax increase; nearly 40 percent are with Tisch and Headlee for a cut; and the rest are in the middle. There's no clear majority.

Michigan voters love their schools. If someone convinces them schools will benefit, they'll tax themselves. But if they believe judges, welfare clients and unions will raid the pot — forget it.

Tornado sirens to sound March 23

Oakland County's tornado sirens will sound at 1 p.m. March 23 as part of Tornado Safety Week.

A tornado can reach wind speeds of up to 300 miles per hour, cutting a path of destruction for more than 200 miles. And Michigan averages 17 tornadoes each year.

With the Michigan tornado season near, it's time to safeguard, said Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy. He declared March 19-25 as Tornado Safety Week.


"Hopefully this year we shall re-

duce personal injuries and fatal incidents due to tornadoes. Through public education, we hope to make people aware of the safeguards against the traumatic destruction of the tornado," Murphy said.

Oakland County EMS/Emergency Management will offer a "skywarn Spotter Training" program to the public in March and April.

All schools and businesses may test their internal tornado safety plans and further educate their employees on tornado safety.


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The Newest Prom Fashions Will Be Taking Off From This Runway On March 18.



At the Twelve Oaks Prom Fashion Show. In the Lord & Taylor Court at 1pm, and again at 3pm. Our Junior Fashion Panel will be modeling the latest Prom fashions from the stores of Twelve Oaks.

Giving you a special preview of all the hot new looks for the 1989 Prom. The Twelve Oaks Prom Fashion Show. It's where to land before you take off for the Prom.

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