

County moves on court taxation issue

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

The Oakland County Board of Commissioners finally has taken a step toward relieving so-called double dipping taxation of courts.

Commissioners approved a resolution Thursday calling for the county to keep more of the money collected as fines from the 52nd District Court. That district court has four

divisions located in Troy, Rochester, Walled Lake and Clarkston.

The resolution is aimed at correcting double taxation in communities that support the court but receive no service from it, according to commissioner Michael McCulloch, R-Royal Oak, who authored the resolution.

Those communities include Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, Bloomfield Township and West Bloomfield,

which have consistently made a fuss about their residents' county taxes being used to pay for a district court, the 52nd, which provides them no services.

These communities have an independent district court, the 48th, located in Bloomfield Township.

BIRMINGHAM CITY commissioners Eleanor Stewart later Thursday described the county's action as

"a short-term solution to a long term problem."

"We appreciate their support and effort to finance the 52nd on their own. However, I do not consider this a long-term solution because it doesn't relieve our residents from the responsibility of financing both the 48th and 52nd district courts."

Recent reports on the increasing caseload of the 52nd court, she said, "concern me because I think there are long-term cost implications."

Communities in the 48th District Court have called on the county and state to find a solution to the double taxation. One suggestion has been that the county offer a tax rebate to those taxed twice.

Commissioner Lawrence Pernick, D-Southfield, co-sponsor of the resolution, called the vote and its debate "the most exciting thing the commission has had before it in a long, long time."

As adopted, by a 14 to 11 vote, the resolution "urges the state of Michigan to amend (legislation) to increase the percentage of ordinance fines retained by Oakland County, as control unit for 52nd District Court, to not less than 90 percent."

The county system of funding district courts was established in 1968. A class action suit has been filed against the state to try and change the system.

IN AN EFFORT to head off passage of the resolution, commissioner Marilyn Gooling, R-Rochester Hills, introduced an amendment calling for additional monies to be phased in over a four-year period.

In an effort to give even more funds back to the county, commissioner vice-chair Nancy McConnell, R-Bloomfield Hills, introduced an amendment asking that surplus funds generated by the court also be included in calculations.

Both resolutions were narrowly defeated.

Also defeated was a request by commissioner G. William Caddell, R-Walled Lake, that the resolution be referred back to the finance committee. Commissioner Richard Skarritt, R-Highland, joined in opposing the resolution.

"THIS IS taking money out of the district I represent. It's self serving and I oppose it," Skarritt said.

The most vocal opponent was first-term commissioner John Pappageorge, R-Troy.

"The trouble with the 90/10 proposal is that it is a point solution to a moving problem. Whatever percent you put in there, you will have inequities on one side or the other. The real problem is (a lack of) funding by the state. This will defer getting to the real issue," Pappageorge said to commissioners and in a letter printed in an area newspaper.

Commissioners John Olsen, R-Berkley, Donald Jensen, R-Birmingham, and Donn Wolf, R-Farmington Hills, and Pernick co-sponsored the resolution with McCulloch, who acknowledges it is not the ideal solution.

"The best thing would be statewide funding of all courts, with uniform pay scales for all court employees. The problem is, the state has never indicated what it's going to do. This, at least, recognizes the inequity in Oakland County."

In a conciliatory gesture following the vote, Pernick told commissioners the issue has been before them for years. "It festers. It breeds resentment and conflict. In the future, we should try to address this in a more positive way. It's not a question of equity. It's a matter of fairness, a tradition we're known for."

Whew! State fully funds teacher pensions

The state Senate has adopted budget bills that will pump \$300 million more into K-12 school coffers than recommended by Gov. Blanchard.

In a victory for out-of-formula school districts, one included \$103 million for full state funding of teacher pensions and Social Security taxes. Blanchard had sought to cap those costs, which would have cost many suburban districts more from their property taxes.

Total state aid tab will be about \$3.1 billion. Senators said the Blanchard administration is underestimating revenues, and it dipped into the current state surplus for the extra money.

MOST DEMOCRATS went along with the Republican-sponsored plan. The GOP was aiming to show it's unnecessary to raise the state sales tax.

Blanchard, along with many labor, school and some business groups, is endorsing a plan to raise the sales tax to 5 percent from the current 4. Half the increase would go into school aid, the other half into property tax relief.

That plan has been reported out of a House committee but hasn't come to a floor vote. A Senate version of the same plan is stuck in committee.

Sen. Jack Welborn, R-Kalamazoo, chided school lobbyists, particularly

the Michigan Education Association, for failing to turn out in force to support the Senate's aid plan.

"Where are they? Why aren't they here as they were a few weeks ago when they wanted a 2-cent tax increase upon the people of the state in order to do effectively the same thing we're doing with general fund monies?" Welborn asked.

But Sen. Lana Pollack, D-Ann Arbor, called the \$300 million "something you give to a starving person, but it doesn't mean it's a healthy diet." She called for action on property tax reduction.

THE BILL to continue paying pension and Social Security costs passed 32-1, with Sens. Doug Cruce, R-Troy,

and Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, absent.

Long dissenter was Sen. Nick Smith, R-Hillsdale County, who said teachers should pay part of the cost themselves.

"In 1974 we supposedly 'cut a deal' with the teachers, that they would no longer have to contribute to their retirement, and in return there would be fewer strikes and a reduced demand for salary increases," Smith said.

"With Michigan teacher salaries now one of the highest in the nation, it is time to reconsider the 'deal.' It is now more appropriate for the school boards to pay half, as the employer, and for the teachers to pay half, as the employee."

Census workers needed

The U.S. Census Bureau has opened an office in Rochester Hills, certifying that the countdown to the 1990 United States Census is underway.

The bureau needs several hundred persons to list and verify residential addresses throughout Oakland County. The collected addresses will be combined to build a nationwide automated address file — a key to a complete and successful census.

Census workers must:

- Have a car in good working condition.
- Be United States citizens.
- Be 18 years old, or be 16 or 17 with a high school diploma or equivalent work or educational experience.

If you live outside the Rochester calling zone and would like to learn more about employment opportunities with the Census Bureau, call collect to the Rochester Hills district office at (313) 853-8200.

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