

trapped in TRAFFIC

Secret routes bring out the NOTS

By Carolyn DeMarco
Staff writer

You've heard of NIMBY, the acronym for the Not In My Back Yard. Those are the conservatives disguised as liberals (or vice versa) who approve of group homes, health beaches, shelters for the homeless, open admittance to community parks, etc. — as long as they're in someone else's neighborhood.

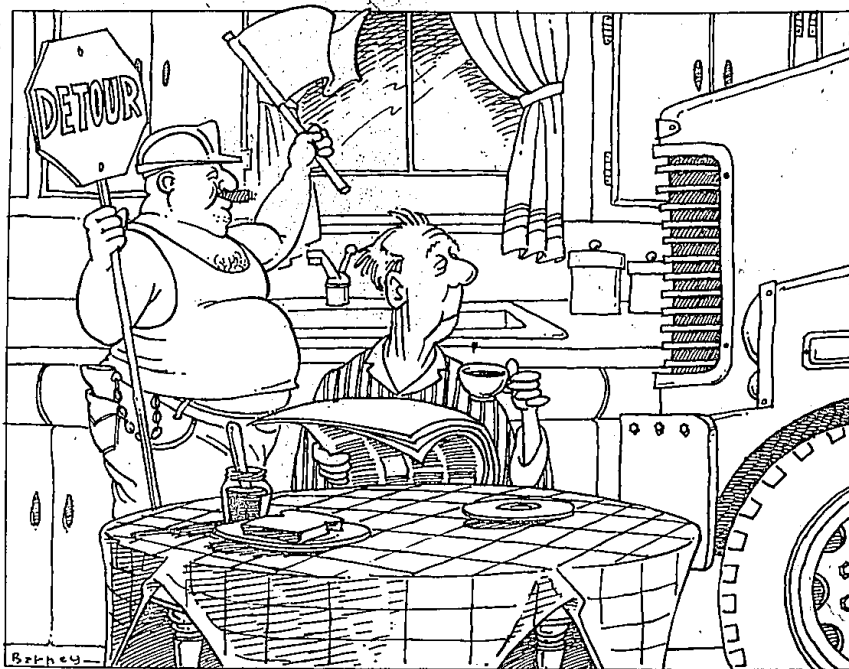
Now there are NOTS — Not On This Street. The phenomenon was discovered last month when the Observer & Eccentric ran what we thought was an innocuous article detailing the rush-hour perils that Oakland County riders face as they cross town. We wrote:

"But you with your thoroughfare savoir-faire are moving and grooving, zipping along because you know how and where to avoid gridlock, traffic tie-ups, road closings and major highway headaches. You have a 'secret' route to work. . . . Whether it's traveling on the shoulder, or sashaying down uncharted side streets, we'd like to hear about it. We'll compile the best responses into a story about motorists like you, who know how to beat the Oakland County traffic that's driving everyone else crazy."

We were prepared for a smattering of telephone calls from some light-hearted folks around the county offering innovative techniques for survival driving.

WE WERE NOT prepared for the dozen or so phone calls from a single Birmingham subdivision bawling the Eccentric for the article, which they saw as aimed directly at them and their ultra-earnest attempts to prevent motorists from cutting through their subdivision from Adams and Maple to Woodward.

The mid-morning callers enojed, pleaded and threatened the Eccentric staff, saying inclusion of their subdivisions as a "detour" in any article would mean lawsuits, picketing



and canceled subscriptions to the paper. Carol Bragdon, a trustee in Birmingham Farms, also complained of what she said was the newspaper's irresponsibility, saying, "Our community will take great exception" to publishing any secret routes.

Our conclusion: There's not much that's amusing about rush-hour traffic. . . . except perhaps for the unidentified Birmingham man, a Bowers Street resident who said his favorite route to the new Bowers Street post office — which is expected to bring more traffic to the pri-

marily residential street — takes him right past the homes of Birmingham city commissioners Dante Lanzetta and Henry Forster. Presumably, he toots his disapproval in passing, although city fathers didn't want the post office on Bowers either.

In other responses, we heard from Barbara Levitt of Bloomfield Hills, who faxed her route from Telegraph and Lone Pine in Bloomfield Township to Big Beaver and Coolidge in Troy.

Levitt begins west on Lone Pine

on a circuitous route that takes her "past Lahser to the first construction (at Cranbrook Schools)." She winds briefly through a neighborhood before she gets back on Lone Pine to Woodward construction and "two blocks south to the first turnaround and north on Woodward." Then it's back to the subs and then Watlins to Coolidge to Cunningham "which is behind the K mart Corporate Headquarters to the parking lot of 3250 W. Big Beaver."

"THE GOOD NEWS," she said, "is that I am always moving. The bad news is that it seems to take forever. But, I do avoid Quanton (at all costs) at rush hour."

R. Long of West Bloomfield had his own solution for improving area traffic: outlaw Concerned Citizens for West Bloomfield, the activist group that has opposed the extension of Northwestern Highway.

"The extension of Northwestern Highway has to go through. Just because it goes through expensive real estate is no reason to deny it. They do more harm than good. They're a selfish group and other West Bloomfield residents don't agree with them."

"They're quoted as spokesmen for the township but if they can't express the viewpoints of other people in the township they should fold up their tents. Lorna McEwen (a long-time member of the group) lives one mile from her work. . . . Of course she has no traffic problems." (Actually McEwen lives about four miles away).

Susan Telford of Farmington Hills is resigned to drivers cutting through her subdivision to avoid the 12 Mile/Drake subdivision. Traffic goes 35 to 40 mph in a subdivision without sidewalks.

"I was a working person myself. I don't object to the traffic. We're going to have that, but I wish they'd be more aware of the residential nature of the area with children. I commuted for a long time. I know it's a problem."

Oakland lacks money for roads, repairs

By Tim Richard

Staff writer

Roads are a cloud in Oakland County's economic silver lining. The county is virtually the victim of its own success as the office capital and high technology paradise of Michigan.

"Clearly, business in Oakland County is the engine driving the economic recovery in Michigan and is creating jobs at a breakneck pace," said Brent Blair, deputy managing director of the County Road Commission, in recent legislative testimony. John Grubbs, OCRMC managing director, insists that any state tax money going into the state transportation economic development fund that will bring Oakland a handful of growth counties more benefit than any other change.

Roads present a \$940 million problem. Here is what county and state officials say they're doing about them.

Q. We're already paying 15 cents tax on a gallon of fuel. What happens to our share?

A. Blair: The road commission has a total budget of \$60 million. Maintenance (patching, snow removal, dust control) takes 30 percent, engineering 6.5 percent, traffic safety 11 percent, administration 5.4 percent, insurance, workers comp and liability 2 percent. That leaves 26 percent, or \$15.5 million, for new construction.

Q. You've been throwing around this \$940 million number. Where did that come from?

A. John Joy, public information officer, OCRMC: In 1985 we surveyed voters in every community, asking them to list what work was needed to handle economic growth in the following decade. It's their list, not ours. With \$94 million a year in needs and \$15.5 million in the budget for construction, the road commission is short of money.

Q. Your board chairman, Richard Vogt, says Southfield has more office space than Detroit, that there has been a 100,000-job increase in the last two years, that Oakland is getting two-thirds of all the office growth in the entire state. With all that building, why can't the property taxes they generate help with roads?

A. Blair: By law, county property taxes can't be used for roads, although cities may use their general fund revenues for roads.

One year, the county general fund had a surplus, from which the county

board of commissioners allocated us \$5 million in non-property tax revenues. We'd like to see that increased to \$10 million.

Q. You were pushing for "developer impact fees" like other states have, under which a big developer would pay for things like intersection improvements, ramps and traffic signals as well as widenings. What happened to that plan?

A. Blair: That's most popular with the taxpayers, but it was defeated in the state House of Representatives. Rep. Maxine Berman, D-Southfield, guided it but has little enthusiasm for trying again. But developers are backing off. There have been abuses in other states, where the money has been used for police as well as for roads. They're benefiting from development. They ought to chip in. We're not giving up on the idea.

Q. Are you still after a county fuel tax?

A. Blair: Yes, two cents a gallon based on the current allocation formula. It would generate \$13 million a year — 42 percent for cities and

villages, 58 percent for the road commission.

The Legislature wouldn't pass a bill allowing us to put it on the ballot. Some northern counties that didn't like the idea at first may be changing their minds. We did get a vehicle registration fee that voters in 1988 rejected.

We still believe in user fees.

Q. There are a couple of legislative proposals to raise fuel taxes. You're in favor, aren't you?

A. Blair: No. The House proposal is a 2-cents increase in the fuel tax, raising \$90 million statewide, plus a one-cent per gallon fee on all petroleum products at the refinery level, raising \$55 million. To the road user, this sounds like a lot of money. Wrong!

None of the petroleum products money will be used on roads where people ordinarily live. It will be used on the state highway system.

The \$90 million gas tax revenue must be divided among public transportation systems, state trunk lines, roads in 83 counties and streets in 534 villages and cities. For the county roads in Oakland County, this seems to mean a revenue increase of

\$2.6 million, not quite enough to effectively handle the widening of one mile of road.

And Oakland has 160 miles of roadway in dire need of widening.

Q. What about the Senate proposal — 2 cents on the fuel tax to pay off \$900 million in road bonds, plus state trunk lines in Oakland County?

A. Blair: Not enough. The Michigan Department of Transportation was already committed to those trunk line projects (Haggerty Road, M-59 and M-275).

Q. The sponsor, Sen. Richard Fessler, R-Commerce Township, wanted to hold hearings this summer on his Senate bills. Is that happening?

A. Fessler's staff: We'd hoped for hearings this summer, but it looks like September or October. The bills are in the Finance Committee, not Fessler's Transportation Committee.

Q. Let's go back to TEDF — the economic development fund. That's in place. Is that helping?

A. Blair: Yes. Over two fiscal years we've received \$12.3 million in Catering C money — congestion projects on county primary roads and city

major streets within urban counties. Oakland gets 40 percent of that statewide money.

The state has made a commitment for \$54.8 million over two to three years out of its bond issue.

Q. When will that money show up as road improvements? It seems to take forever.

A. Joy: It takes time. The taxes must come on stream. There is preliminary engineering to do to avoid harm to lakes and wetlands. Then there is a state environmental review.

Locally there are hearings and public information programs. If federal funds are involved, there must be grade inspections. It takes time for right of way acquisition.

Finally there is construction time, including arranging for bypasses and detours.

Q. OCRMC chairman Vogt says that "traffic paths have changed significantly. No longer do commuters travel from sleepy little suburban villages to the big city of Detroit." What are you doing about intra-county and cross-suburban roads?

A. Joy: In the last fiscal year, we spent more than \$8 million on new road construction to reduce congestion.

One project was Long Lake Road from Franklin to Middlebelt in Bloomfield and West Bloomfield townships, a cost of \$2.1 million.

The other was Big Beaver Road's first section in Troy, which cost slightly more than \$5 million.

Note that both of those are east-west roads.

Q. What are some of the projects the road commission is seeking money for?

A. Joy: We've been approved by the state for projects in:

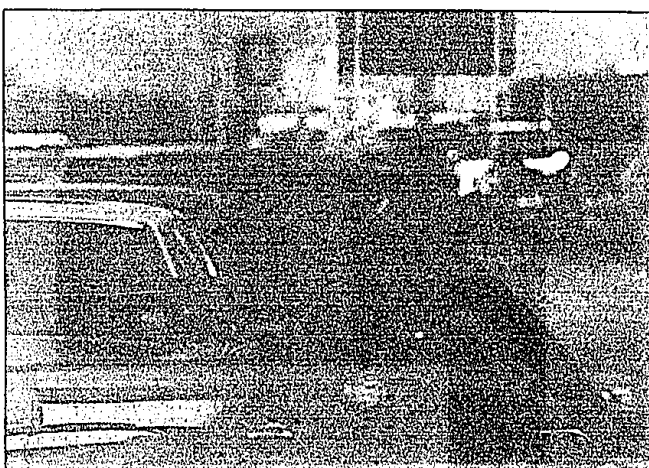
● Southfield — Franklin Road bridge over I-936, \$1.8 million

● Rochester Hills — Hamlin Road, \$5.3 million

● Auburn Hills — M-59 at Squirrel and Adams roads, \$14 million

● Farmington Hills — 12 Mile, \$3.2 million

● Troy — I-75 at Crooks, Long Lake, and Square Lake roads — almost \$11 million.



It's the afternoon rush hour at M-102 and Grand River in Farmington Hills.

Road commission operates on its own

The Oakland County Road Commission won't get county general fund money if executive Daniel T. Murphy has his way.

"When I control the expenditure, yes," said Murphy in reply to a road official's request for \$10 million of general fund money.

"No way am I going to give them \$10 million," said Murphy, who thinks more county-wide administrative departments should be unified under the county executive's office.

THE ROAD commission operates with a share of state gasoline and weight taxes and under separate laws.

The three road commission board members are appointed by the elected county board of commissioners. Otherwise, the road agency is an entirely separate unit of government.

Several years ago, the county board of commissioners voted \$5 million of a general fund surplus for roads and then mustered a two-thirds vote to override the executive's veto. But commissioners have

shown no inclination to repeat the grant.

MURPHY HAS talked openly from time to time of a home-rule charter for Oakland and of unifying the administration. Only Wayne, of Michigan's 13 counties, has a charter and has been able to get state legislation bringing the road agency into county government. The executive operates it through his public services department, and commissioners approve the separate budget.

"We haven't abandoned the idea," said Patrick Nowak, Murphy's deputy and political right arm, "but I have nothing to update you on."

Nowak's energies have been devoted this year to reorganizing and expanding SMART, the four-county suburban bus authority he chairs. Nowak said no one has challenged the road commission's assertion that there are \$940 million of road needs to be met over 10 years for economic expansion. Nowak called the number "A compilation of all the localities' wish lists."