

Officials take board's lawsuit threat seriously

By Darrell Clem
staff writer

Walled Lake city officials consider "serious" a threatened lawsuit from the school board over the city's plans to divert some tax dollars to a downtown improvement project.

"I always take these kinds of threats to heart," City Manager Michael Dorman said Monday.

Dorman's comments came one week after Walled Lake Schools Superintendent James Gelster warned the city council of a possible lawsuit over the city's plans to create a Downtown Development Authority and capture some tax revenues to fund road improvements.

The city's decision last week to divert some tax revenues to the DDA project placed a strain on what had been described as excellent relations between the city and the school board.

THE CITY contends the plan is necessary to halt declining property values and "make it the kind of city where people will want to live 20 years down the road," Dorman said.

The proposal includes connecting the east and west sections of Maple Road, widening and paving Pontiac Trail and improving Gamma Street — projects the city expects to spark new growth.

Walled Lake Schools

The school board, which already is seeking a Headlee Amendment override this year to pump more taxes into school operating funds, countered that using school revenues for road improvements jeopardizes the quality of education.

But Dorman appeared hopeful the two sides will continue talks aimed at reaching an acceptable compromise.

"I believe that the relations between the city and the schools are good, and I hope they will stay that way," he said. "We've been talking, and we're going to keep on talking."

Gelster warned that unless the two sides reach an accord to protect "maximum" school dollars, the school board "will have no alternative but to resort to litigation in order to protect the interests of its students and their education."

School officials have not yet estimated how much money they "would lose to the DDA."

Dorman indicated the DDA is needed to give the city "a viable, economically healthy environment."



DAI DEAN/staff photographer

Walled Lake city officials hope to extend westbound Maple Road from the intersection of Pontiac Trail, where motorists now must make a right or left turn.

City officials say the new growth expected in the DDA area eventually will result in more tax revenues for schools.

"Certainly DDAs make people edgy, and, more specifically, they make schools edgy," Dorman conceded. "But we give a great deal of support to the Walled Lake Schools."

School officials questioned the le-

gality of the DDA, saying the city appears to have exaggerated its claims that an "emergency" exists to warrant a DDA. Gelster indicated that, contrary to what city officials say, property values generally are not declining.

But Dorman said Walled Lake "meets the criteria within the state statute" for creating a DDA.

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