

Communities welcome summit on sprawl

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Oakland communities generally welcome the call for a "summit meeting" as a first step to manage growth and minimize problems like urban sprawl and traffic gridlock. "It might help us make some inroads" toward good land management, said Frank Gerstenecker, city manager of Troy. "We don't need throw-away communities."

Ronald U. DeMaagd, deputy city administrator of Southfield, said the proposed summit would be "a good starting point."

But the problems are much broader than the boundaries of Oakland County. The solution may also require action from Macomb and Wayne counties.

Troy and Southfield were among the communities County Executive Daniel T. Murphy consulted before Thursday when he proposed "a planning effort that will lead to a strategic plan . . . for economic development and growth."

"We don't want to control (growth). We want to manage it."

— Daniel Murphy
county executive

IN HIS PROPOSAL to the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, as well as in a press briefing, Murphy was careful to avoid the word "control" in reference to land use or economic development.

Mindful that Oakland has rejected most forms of regional planning or any proposal for urban government, Murphy said, "We don't want to control (growth). We want to manage it."

The county has no authority to initiate any planning, he said. That's the right of individual communities. But Oakland can get communities together so they can discuss their goals and aspirations, Murphy said.

The "piece-meal" approach to ur-

ban and economic development directly contributes to sprawl and cut-throat competition between communities, the executive said.

While competition is good, Oakland's cities should not be "undercutting" each other to attract new development, he said.

MURPHY DIDN'T mention the so-called Auburn Hills "mega-mall" by name. But he did refer to the ill feeling it created between Auburn Hills and southern Oakland communities like Southfield.

Southfield and other communities expressed resentment about the mega-mall taking business — and economic prosperity — away from

them with the help of public moneys used to build new roads and utilities.

Citing projections for accelerated growth in Oakland County, Murphy said the economic competition would accelerate, leading to more bickering and less cooperation.

Unchecked urban sprawl — compounded by municipal bickering — is threatening to "destroy the very qualities that make the quality of life in Oakland County so unique," Murphy said.

The problems are so pressing and the prospects so bleak, Murphy said, that they may provide the impetus needed for countywide planning to be successful.

Oakland and other counties have rejected regional planning for decades, Murphy said. But the prospect of urban sprawl and gridlock may force communities to take another look at the possibility.

BUT GROWTH isn't the only culprit, according to Joseph Joachim, the county's director of community and economic growth who joined

Murphy during the press briefing.

"It's not just that the county is growing," said Joachim. "Things are moving around."

Businesses in the county's southern communities are moving to northern communities, taking their employees and customers with them, Joachim said. They leave behind empty buildings, unused school rooms and a hole in the vacated community's tax base.

The vacated communities have to raise taxes because of it," he said. "While northern communities must build an infrastructure to accommodate new businesses."

Gerstenecker agreed with that analysis, saying such competition created "throw away communities. The summit may help us avoid it."

Murphy said his summit could be the beginning of a dialogue to balance that kind of economic shift.

Oakland must balance the aspirations of emerging communities like Novi and Wixom with the need for redevelopment in aging cities like Oak Park, Southfield, Ferndale and Pontiac, Murphy said.

The executive said he hasn't set a date for his urban summit. But it will likely be in January "with all the county's 61 communities invited."

The executive's proposal was also welcomed by county commissioners, although most said they are anxious to see the specifics of any planning efforts.

Their cautious optimism was perhaps summarized by commission vice chairwoman Nancy McConnell, R-Bloomfield Hills, who said, "Recycling older communities while helping others to grow makes imminent sense in economic as well as human terms."

State senate kills tax share plan

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Suburban power on a key state Senate committee has killed a plan to allow business property tax sharing among school districts.

The Senate Appropriations Committee last week split 5-5, thus failing to report the measure to the Senate floor.

"It's dead for this session," said an elated Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills. "It puts a little crimp in Dan DeGrow's sale. He couldn't get it out of committee."

DeGrow, R-Fort Huron, was chief Senate advocate of having school districts with high commercial and industrial growth share it with residential, farm and no-growth districts.

VOTING AGAINST the bills were

Faxon, Doug Cruce, R-Troy, Robert Geake, R-Northville, Lt. Gov-elect Connie Binsefeld, R-Maple City, and Nick Smith, R-Hillsdale.

Binsefeld, though representing a northern district, spent 20 years as a teacher in southern Oakland County. Voting yes were DeGrow, Harry Gast, R-St. Joseph, William Sederburg, R-East Lansing, Jackie Vaughn III, D-Detroit, and Lana Pollock, D-Ann Arbor.

Three members were absent: Phil Arthurhult, R-Whitehall, John Holmes, D-Detroit, and Joe Conroy, D-Flint.

The Legislature is planning to wrap up this year's work Wednesday or Thursday. The Senate last week canceled all committee meetings except Appropriations.

KILLED WERE House Bills 5885-

6, sponsored by Rep. William Keith, D-Garden City, and co-sponsored by members from Grand Rapids.

They were introduced at the request of the Kent County Intermediate School District and Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, whose business members wanted growth in commercial and industrial property to be shared among the school districts whose graduates they hired.

The Keith bills, passed in September by the House, would have been permissive — all school boards within a county would have to agree to share business growth taxes. Earlier in the week, DeGrow's appropriations subcommittee favored the bills in a 2-1 vote.

It was the camel's nose in the tent. They'll come back and revisit it," predicted Faxon.

DeGrow ACTUALLY wants a much stronger version — mandatory statewide sharing of half the growth in commercial and industrial property taxes.

In return, districts losing property tax revenue would get back some of the \$72 million in "categorical" aid the Legislature took away this year.

Suburban lawmakers generally denounce that plan. Republican Rep. Shirley Johnson of Royal Oak called it "giving our districts the choice of death or a disease." Faxon called it "blackmail . . . putting them between a rock and a hard place."

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