

County loses lawsuit to GM

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Oakland County government must pay the General Motors Corp. about \$2 million — and lose about \$500,000 in annual revenue — under a proposed settlement over the automaker's property tax assessment.

But some school districts — particularly Pontiac's — could also suffer, although the Michigan Department of Education is expected to ease the pain by reimbursing the district.

"The county has set aside some money anticipating this (the settlement)," said commissioner Donald E. Bishop, vice chairman of the board's finance committee. "So, we won't be hurt badly. But some school districts will suffer."

However, county officials are under pressure to expand the courthouse, add two additional circuit court judges and expand the prosecutor's staff. Budget hearings begin next month.

The finance committee reviewed and approved the agreement last Thursday. It must, however, be ratified by the full board of commissioners, which is scheduled to take up the matter Thursday.

THE PROPOSED SETTLEMENT is the latest round in a dispute that began in 1983, when GM challenged the basis on which its property taxes are computed.

The automaker claimed its plants — like the GMC Pontiac Manufacturing complex in Pontiac and the Buick-Oldsmobile-Cadillac assembly plant in Orion Township — were over assessed and the corporation was overtaxed. Demanding lowered assessments and rebates, the automaker complained to local governments in

various parts of Michigan including the Pontiac, Flint and Kalamazoo areas.

Some of those disputes have been resolved, often with the help of the Michigan Tax Tribunal.

In Oakland County, however, officials from GM and the county tried to resolve the issue through negotiations. The agreement approved by the finance committee is the result.

The settlement is tentatively on the agenda for Thursday's regular semi-monthly meeting of the board. But board chairman Roy Rewold, R-Oakland Township, questions whether or not commissioners will have enough information to vote.

"I haven't seen the final figures," Rewold said Friday. "I want all the figures before we make any kind of decision."

While the figures aren't final, as far as Rewold is concerned, he agrees that county government will not be financially crippled if, as he expects, it must return about \$2 million and lose future revenue.

"WE'VE ANTICIPATED THIS," he said. "So the burden on us won't be nearly as bad as it will for school districts like Pontiac." Here are some figures pertaining to the agreement as compiled by Oakland County budget director Russell Martin, who helped negotiate the settlement:

- GM will receive about \$2 million from Oakland County, probably by Nov. 1, instead of the \$28 million it requested.

- GM property tax assessments in Oakland County will be reduced by about 4 percent — instead of the 79 percent reduction it requested. That reduction will cost Oakland about \$500,000 in lost revenue each year.

Edison gripes keep on coming

By Wayne Pool
staff writer

People with complaints about the July 7 blackout, or other interruptions in utility service, will have another opportunity to speak out before the Michigan Public Service Commission on Wednesday in Lansing.

The commission, chief regulating

agency for Michigan power companies, will receive a staff report on the massive post-holiday outage, listen to comments from consumer's Power and Detroit Edison, then open the forum to public comments.

"We don't want to get into a back-and-forth situation between the companies and their customers, but we are interested in hearing people's comments," commission chairman

William Long said.

For Chester Fortuna, the opportunity couldn't come soon enough.

"I'M COMPLAINING not just about July 7 but for incidents that have happened over the 23 years I've been at my present address," the Bloomfield Hills resident said during a regional forum Thursday in Dearborn.

Public service commissioners held a major forum on the power outages July 29 in Livonia.

Staff members compiled their report from comments made during that session. Though Consumer's Power and Edison representatives did not speak during the earlier forum, they will make comments Wednesday.

Thousands of homes in Wayne and Oakland counties lost power as a result of the July 7 storm. The power companies recruited workers from other states to restore damaged lines, some homeowners remained without power for three days or more.

Last week's forum in Dearborn dealt with energy issues in general, not just the storm and its aftermath.

Among the questions asked: Why is Detroit Edison closing its

regional offices?

The answer, commissioners said, was that a company analysis indicated it was cheaper to have bills paid by mail. "We try to explain the need (for offices) to the companies, but that's really not our prerogative," commissioner Ronald Russell said.

Why doesn't Michigan do more for energy conservation?

"We agree there's more that could be done," Russell said. Commissioners have suggested a \$60 million energy conservation plan to Consumers Power and likely will make a similar suggestion to Detroit Edison when its rates come up for review in 1993.

Why do I have to pay a service charge to my gas company even in months when I don't use any gas?

Commissioners said service charges were approved for some utilities as part of the rate process. The process takes a utility's operating costs, investment in equipment and projected profit into account in setting rates.

The hearing Wednesday will be at 9 a.m. in the Michigan Public Service Commission hearing room, 6545 Mercantile Way, Lansing. For additional details, call the commission at 517-374-6368.

County eyes adding prosecutors, judges

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

The Oakland County prosecutor says he's willing to accept — for now — the four additional assistants who county commissioners appear willing to fund on an emergency basis.

But when budget hearings begin next month, Prosecutor Richard Thompson said he will ask commissioners for 21 new assistants and 30 investigators, paralegals and clerks to support them.

Thompson made his comments Friday afternoon, less than 24 hours after members of the county board's finance committee rejected his request for 14 more people. Commissioners agreed to recommend four, including one to be financed by a drug grant.

The finance committee also agreed to recommend two new circuit court judges — to be elected next year — and the support staff to go with them. Each new judgeship is expected to cost the county about \$1.4 million, including salaries for the 16 staff members.

Both requests are expected to be

reviewed by the Oakland County Board of Commissioners at this Thursday's regular meeting.

IF THE RECOMMENDATIONS are approved, as expected, the new prosecutors could be hired yet this year. The new judges would be elected in 1992 and on the bench the following January.

Both requests were supported with data indicating the legal caseload in Oakland County continues to increase dramatically.

Judge Stephen N. Andrews, for example, told commissioners that each Oakland County judge gets about 1,900 new cases annually. Oakland judges continue to have the highest disposition rate in the state, Andrews said. But two new judges are needed. "One judge would do nothing," he said when asked about the possibility of granting one new judge in 1993 and another the following year.

Figures from the court administrator's office support the claim that Oakland judges are productive. The administrator's office said the average caseload for each of Oakland's 18 judges is about 2,000, compared with 1,300 statewide.

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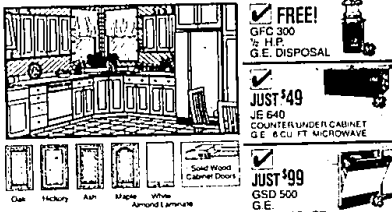
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