POINTS OF VIEW

State maps improving but are still found lacking

TIM RICHARD

Pat Nowak wasn't just trumpeting bureaucratic air when he said Michigan's 1992 transportation map is improved.

The boss of the state Department of Transportation said there are more than 300 changes, and pointed out a few. But his press release didn't point out the biggest change of all:

No picture of the governor.

For the first time in a generation, at least, MDOT's map has no color photo of the chief executive. The Great Lake State is rare if not alone in the nation in that regard.

John Engler often accused his predecessor, Jim Blanchard, of using state publications to trumpet himself. There's a puffy message about our 11,000 lakes and 3,200 miles of shoreline with Engler's scrawl, and that's all.

The big news is that Michigan has turned the corner in admitting we have a treasure in our 2.7 million acres of National Forests.

Until 1962, our maps showed the National Forests in a green tint; then they mysteriously disappeared. For a dozen years I griped about it. The bureaucracy gave conflicting reasons for eliminating them.

Nearly all states I have visited and studied show National Forests on their maps. Colorado would be nothing without them. Even Indiana and Illinois show them.

Michigan's four National Forests — Ottawa and Hiawatha in the UP, Manistee and Huron in the northern lower — have 80 campgrounds that are, on average, better maintained than State Forest campgrounds. But for 30 years, state government has refused to admit the existence of National Forests. Our freeway welcome centers at Monroe, Quincy and New Buffalo carry no literature about National Forests.

Nowak's regime has made a partial improvement. The map text has two paragraphs on the forests and where to write for information.

I still want them *shown* on the map. There would be no "clutter," as the bureaucracy says — just a green tint. The map is, in Nowak's own words, "the mainstay of the travel industry."

For the first time, MDOT's map shows the locations of nine sunken *ships off our coastlines. Nice touch.* But I'll warrant thousands more families visit the National Forest campgrounds than dive to see sunken ships.

MDOT's chart of state parks — locations and facilities — is improved by slightly larger type.

A major change is more inset maps of cities, Mount Pleasant, Adrian and Traverse City appear for the first time.

And there's an inset map of downtown Detroit showing streets, convention halls and the People Mover route.

That's understandable. Before ascending to his lofty post in Lansing, the cherubic Nowak was deputy Oakland County executive and chair of the suburban public transit board. Unlike traditional highway men, Nowak appreciates non-auto transportation modes.

MDOT's new map also shows the route of car ferry across Lake Michigan from Ludington to Manitowoc.

Unlike maps you buy in the gas station, *MDOT's map is distributed free.* Some two million copies have been printed for $430,000, equal to the salaries of 10 state legislators and a much better deal.

Average cost is 21.5 cents apiece.

For the first time, MDOT's map is printed on recycled paper.

I've come across travel books and calendars about Michigan that were printed on other continents. Not the MDOT map. Once again, the printer is Michigan Litho Inc., of Grand Rapids.

Want a nice new map? Try MDOT welcome centers, local chambers of commerce, the Michigan Travel Bureau, MDOT district offices or your friendly state legislator. Or send a post card with your full address to: MAPS, MDOT, PO Box 30050, Lansing 48909.

And ask 'em to show the National Forests next time.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events.

'Super foods' may just be a government cover-up

JACK GLADDEN

I'm keeping a real close eye on my vegetable garden this year. And I'd advise all of you other home gardeners to do the same.

You see, I've been reading about these new "super foods," the ones that are "genetically engineered." And I'm starting to get just a little bit nervous about what might be growing behind the garage.

When I read the first story about tomatoes that could be ripened on the vine and still shipped out to supermarkets without any danger of rotting, I thought that was pretty neat.

And I thought all the worrywarts who were babbling about the lack of government testing and controls were just doomsayers who had nothing better to do. After all, hybridization — splicing a piece of one plant onto another to produce a variety that is tastier or sturdier or prettier than the originals — has been around for a long time. So what is so different about genetic engineering?

"We have turned off the gene responsible for rotting."

That's how a spokesman for Calgene Inc., the California biotechnology company that got government approval to market the super tomato (called Flavr Savr), explained the process that is supposed to get red, juicy, tasty tomatoes from the vine to the dinner table — even in the middle of winter — without spoiling or rotting.

Turned off the gene. That's how it works. Scientists have found a way to get into the chromosomes of plants and manipulate the genes (the basic stuff of life) to produce varieties that won't spoil, that will resist disease and that will even kill insects.

And what's really bizarre about this whole process is that they're combining plant genes with animal genes to produce strange new species.

Monsanto has taken a gene from a bacterium and inserted it into corn, potato and cotton plants to produce varieties that can kill insects but — so the geneticists say — cause no harm to humans or animals. Other cross-species breeding includes potatoes containing silk moth genes, corn with firefly genes and tomatoes with flounder genes.

If all this isn't weird enough, scientists at Michigan State University and James Madison University in Virginia have developed a *plant* that can produce *plastic.* And others in Princeton, N.J., are trying to develop a low-cholesterol pig.

(If they really used their imagination, they could combine pig genes with genes from chickens and potatoes and come up with a creature that would produce bacon and eggs with hashbrowns on the side.)

All of this conjures up images of bearded scientists working in dark laboratories pouring bubbling potions from one test tube to another with the help of assistants named Igor.

While some people worry about the medical and religious implications of such experiments, I keep wondering if that movie about "The Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" or the song about "The Eggplant That Ate Chicago" were as far-fetched as they seemed at the time.

When Paul Zindel wrote a play called "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds," maybe he was trying to tell us something. And anyone who saw Charlton Heston in "Soylent Green" knows that the futuristic foodstuff in that tale wasn't really made from soybeans and lentils. That was just a government cover story.

So what happens when those ears of corn with the firefly genes start flashing at me as I'm about to plop them into a pot of boiling water?

Are the tomatoes with the flounder genes going to swim away instead of cooking down into spaghetti sauce?

Will those potatoes with the silk moth genes sprout wings and flutter off as soon as I dig them up?

When plants can fight off disease and insects without the help of dusts and sprays, how can I be sure that what's growing behind the garage doesn't turn out to be some kind of RoboCrop?

I don't know, but I'm keeping a close eye on my garden this year: . . . from my kitchen window . . . through binoculars.