

April road fund deadline nears

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

SEMCOC and Gov. John Engler are going eyeball to eyeball over splitting up road money. The construction season is almost here, and both sides are drawing their weapons.

"We'll either solve the problem or renegotiate," said a hopeful John Ambarger, executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, a seven-county planning agency. But SEMCOG delegates loaded their weapons by authorizing him to hire a lawyer and sue for a larger share of federal aid. The vote was 20-15. Engler is using his weapons, too. "He has threatened aid to Detroit Metro Airport (run by Wayne County)," said Michael Duggan, deputy county executive. "He has threatened the deal in Oakland County on Clinton Valley Center land, Mayor (Dennis) Archer has been threatening on state aid to Tiger Stadium."

"I've listened to Brooks Patterson (Republican Oakland County executive) say, 'I'm getting pressured state-wide — my career is threatened.' Brooks is putting

roads ahead of party. Courage is contagious," said Duggan at the March 21 SEMCOG executive committee meeting.

Supporting the SEMCOG position with its authorization to sue were all of the Wayne County and Detroit delegations, a majority from Livingston County, all of Washtenaw County, all of Detroit and half of Oakland County. Supporting the Engler-MDOT plan were all of Macomb County, half of Oakland and MDOT's Lambert.

Oakland County delegates split 3-3. Favoring the SEMCOG plan were Grubba, representing Patterson; Birmingham councilmember Dante Lanzetta; and Walled Lake Mayor Bill Roberts. Among the no votes were Republican county commissioners David Moffitt of Farmington Hills and Nancy Dingeldey of Wixom and Milford Township Supervisor James Caswell.

In Oakland County, the SEMCOG plan restores three shelved projects to the 1997 TIP program: Campbell Road from 12 to 13 Mile, reconstruction; Elizabeth Lake Road from Cooley Lake

Road to M-59, widen to five lanes; and Maple Road from Hunter to Adams, widen to five lanes.

To understand the duel, think of a two-house legislature. Engler is one; SEMCOG the other. Both must agree on identical versions of a bill for it to become law. The Federal Highway Administration has set an April 1 deadline for a deal. Contractors are sending out form letters warning SEMCOG officials to "reconsider your political posturing."

The bill, in this case, is called TIP, for Transportation Improvement Program. It's a three-year plan for splitting either \$1.8 billion or \$2.1 billion in federal and state money. The total size depends on whether Engler and the Legislature can agree on \$350 million in new fuel taxes.

SEMCOC's version gives the Michigan Department of Transportation an 86-14 percent advantage in the first year and the time-honored 75-25 advantage in the second and third years. "The state ought to look long and hard at it," said SEMCOG's Ambarger. "It's a workable solution."

MDOT spokesman Louis Lam-

bert disagreed. He said SEMCOG's version leaves nothing for state bridges and safety projects in the two outer years. Supporting Engler, some Republican lawmakers from Macomb, Livingston and western Wayne counties accuse SEMCOG of "vetoing" Engler's plan.

Not so, said John Grubba, Patterson's deputy county executive and former chief of the Oakland Road Commission. "Under federal law, the governor and the metropolitan planning organization (SEMCOC) must agree. ISTEA (the federal transportation act) says a plan must be fiscally constrained — no projects to be guessed at," said Grubba, blistering MDOT's Lambert for failing to list the bridge and safety projects it wants.

Grubba said the latest SEMCOG TIP knocks out state bike paths, roadside parks and restroom improvements in the two outer years. "Our roads are going to hell. I'll go for better local roads over toilets," he said, declaring the Engler-MDOT plan "ridiculous, bizarre; it will be sent back by the feds."

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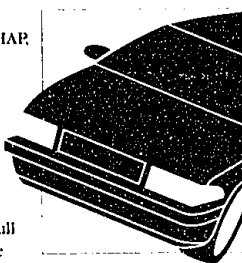
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