

Budget calls for small tax cut

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

A county commissioners are likely to get a small reduction in their county taxes under the 1997-98 budget that will be reviewed beginning next month.

Commissioners aren't vocal, however, about the pay raise they will likely approve before the budget is adopted by the end of the year.

The 674-page budget submitted by County Executive L. Brooks Patterson calls for lowering the county levy by one-tenth of a mill to 4.3665 mills. If the budget is approved, as expected, taxes on a house with a market value of \$100,000 (and assessed at 50 percent) would drop about \$5.

That's not much, admits Patterson. "But the fact we can cut taxes at all, speaks well of our financial situation," he said.

Patterson and county commissioners like Sue Ann Douglas, R-Rochester, would like bigger tax cuts. But they don't want to cut too much in good economic times because it might mean having to raise taxes in lean years.

There are some potentially expensive problems on — like needing more jail space — the horizon, said Douglas, chair of the finance committee. Officials don't want to give a bigger tax cut — even in an election year — if they might have to raise taxes the next year.

Commissioners are scheduled to begin budget hearings on Oct. 3 and finish by mid or late November.

Pay hikes for county commissioners is not a specific item included in the budget, said Douglas. "But they're very likely to come up."

That's because state law prohibits commissioners raising

OAKLAND COUNTY

their own salaries. That means the county board has until Dec. 31 to raise the salary for the next group of commissioners who begin their terms on Jan. 1.

Since most of the commissioners who would vote on a pay will likely be re-elected and thus returning next year, they will — in effect — be voting my raises for themselves without violating any statutes.

In previous years commissioners have generally raised the pay for those on the next county board after the election, but before the end of the year.

"I have voted against the pay hike," said Douglas, "although I believe commissioners deserve

the increase. I really don't think voters are in any action at all."

If a raise for commissioners comes before the board — and Douglas thinks it will — the dollar increase would be roughly the same as pay hikes granted over the previous two years to other county employees.

If most of the county's 4,300 other employees got a three percent increase in 1995 and 1996, for example, the salary for commissioners would go up about 6 percent for 1997 and 1998.

If that pattern held true, the annual salary for commissioners would go from the current \$23,468 to around \$24,876, for an increase of about \$1,408.

Officials, lawmakers review road money decisions, issues

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

It's all in the back rooms — if indeed there is any action at all.

State lawmakers, Gov. Engler's Administration, regional planners, county officials and business interests are negotiating on how to sweeten the \$1.3 billion pot of road money amid wide agreement that Michigan's roads are the worst in the Midwest.

Major issues:

• Which road taxes should be raised?
Since 1982 the state fuel tax has been 15 cents per gallon. Odds are this tax, 46th in the nation, will be increased.

But the petroleum lobby points out the state also levies its 6 percent sales tax on gasoline — roughly 6.4 cents per gallon. That revenue goes mainly for schools, not roads. So Michigan's total fuel tax is 21.4 cents — 10th in the nation.

In round numbers, here are the major revenue streams flowing into the transportation lake: gasoline (15 cents/gal.), \$700 million; diesel (16 cents/gal. minus a 6-cent discount for commercial vehicles), \$100 million; motor vehicle weight tax (increased 92 percent in the last decade), \$500 million.

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