

POINTS OF VIEW

Local groups aren't waiting for state to solve road problems

The Michigan Legislature is stalled over a series of bills to curb urban sprawl. Luckily, local officials, business people and other concerned residents of established communities are not waiting around for whatever state lawmakers finally put together.

They are beefing up the quality of life in our older suburbs, making it more desirable to remain or locate a home or business where culture and services already exist. One important way is by improving our roads, a new benchmark in assessing quality of life.

At one time, roads were just for traversing through the community." U.S. Rep. Joseph Knollenberg, R-Bloomfield Township, said last week at a ceremony celebrating a new road beautification project spanning Southfield and Oak Park. "We've started looking at our highways as having to be pleasing to the eye and having to provide a better quality of life."

Telegraph and Greenfield roads will be upgraded with walkways, crosswalks, trees, shrubs and colorful wildflowers thanks to \$626,000 in state-administered federal funds together with \$250,000 from the cities of Southfield and Oak Park. The Telegraph project includes the three-mile stretch from I-690 to Eight Mile. Greenfield will undergo 1.3 miles of beautification between Mount Vernon and Eight Mile.

It's probably no coincidence that both projects tie-in to Eight Mile Road. That's because the Eight Mile Boulevard Association has been hard at work since 1993 improving the 27 miles of that road, from I-94 on the East to I-76 on the West — in terms of both beautification and safety.

The road, previously a much-maligned border between Detroit and Wayne County and the suburbs of Oakland and Macomb counties, is showing the results of the cooperation of the 13 communities and three counties along its route. In its first three years, the Eight Mile association has generated more than \$700,000 for improvements through a combination of federal, state, local and private contributions. Their objectives include landscaping the median, reducing litter and blight, improving bus stop facilities, coordinating police enforcement and crime prevention activities and helping developers and brokers attract or expand business establish-

ments. Specifically, more than 30 businesses have improved, opened or expanded since 1993, according to Sharlan Douglas, EMBA director. "They've added three-quarters of a million square feet and a thousand jobs." The association has created a Business Advisory Council and an annual Eight Mile Clean Team Day to encourage businesses to spruce up their properties. Working in cooperation with neighborhood groups, they have prevented the expansion of topless bars and closed one bar outright.



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And they urged the joint sweeps against prostitution that six police departments and the Wayne County Sheriff's Department conducted this past summer. Next up is creating 24 perennial gardens on the Eight Mile median from Grand River to Vernier at a cost of \$400,000. Five are scheduled for this year.

Not to be outdone, the Grand River Corridor Study Group was launched in 1994-95. Redevelopment plans for the sector from Eight Mile to west of Middlebelt in Farmington Hills, attracted about \$600,000 in combined state and federal grant money and city funds. Curb have been repaved, landscaping and lighting improved and blighted property purchased and cleared. Still to come are improvements west of the West River Shopping Center to the Farmington border.

New plans have just been completed to re-beautify Woodward Avenue, the area's major artery. The Woodward Avenue Action Association begins work this spring on a mile-long \$200,000-plus pilot project from Catalpa to Lincoln. Most of the money comes from state-administered federal grants.

Long-range, the association is seeking

\$800,000 to qualify for federal matching funds to beautify the stretch from Eight Mile to Quorton, says Will Hicks of Beverly Hills, who chairs the Woodward Avenue Action Committee. Beautifying the median is the number one priority, Hicks says. Redesigning parking, urging individual businesses to improve storefronts and assigning more logical addresses are also on the docket. The latter includes changing the name of Hunter to Woodward and Woodward to Old Woodward in Birmingham.

Business owners and officials from Birmingham, Berkley, Royal Oak, Huntington Woods, Pleasant Ridge and Ferndale are united in the effort to improve Woodward, Hicks reports. "It was felt that no other road was such a major representation of Michigan."

Roads are for moving along. It's obvious that many people and communities are involved in making them reasons for staying put as well.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. To comment on this column, call (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1997 or write or fax, (810)644-1314, a letter to this newspaper's editor.

Libertarian revisits idea of one-chamber state legislature

Henry Wolson has emerged again to push an idea whose time has come, whether Michiganians realize it or not.

A lawyer by background and investment banker by trade, Wolson contacted my fellow newshound Hugh McDiarmid at the Free Press to offer what's left of his 1994 effort at unicameralism to anyone who wants to take up the cause.

Unicameralism means a one-chamber legislature, for those who avoided Latin — "uni" for one, "camera" for room. No more House of Representatives, Senate and conference committees if the public wises up and votes yes.

Wolson is a libertarian type (my characterization) who made an intelligent and worthy run for the Oakland Community College board a few years back. I encouraged him to take another shot, but he has seen fit to work on other projects.

He wasn't alone in the early effort. Then-Rep. Jerry Vorva, R-Plymouth, was pushing the cause in the Legisla-

ture, which could put the proposal on the ballot by a two-thirds vote of both chambers. But Vorva got on the wrong side of Right to Life on the abortion issue, and his innovative career was terminated in 1994.

The Legislature itself is unlikely to initiate a plan to lay off half its members. Voters will need 309,000 petition signatures to put it on the ballot.

Unfortunately, backers of a one-house legislature use the wrong argument in selling the plan — cheapness. They say it could save \$50 million, which sounds like big bucks compared to your family budget and mine.

But \$50 million is less than 1 percent of an \$8 billion general fund budget, and less than one-fifth of one percent of Michigan's total of \$30 billion in spending.

Citizens could keep better track of mischief with only one chamber to watch. Many ideas pass the first chamber — Rep. Greg Kazan, R-Rochester, has a pro-citizen Freedom of Informa-



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tion Act amendment; the revised hunting license fees also come to mind — only to have things fall apart in the other chamber when they're not watching.

Lawmakers often bamboozle their constituents by getting a bill they know is bad passed on one side of the State Capitol, milking it for publicity, and then letting it languish on the other side when the heat is off.

Or else lobbyists let a popular bill go through one house, when the glare of publicity is bright, and kill it in the other, when the great unwashed public is watching crime news on television. My particular gripe is the Legislature's third chamber — conference committees, used when both chambers pass different versions of the same bill. The speaker appoints three representatives; the Senate majority leader, three senators.

Unfortunately, conference committees:

- Don't have regularly scheduled meetings.
- May not even be convened until the two top leaders have put together a deal. They then call the conference committee together five minutes before the last day's session starts and give the members a take-it-or-leave-it decision, which amounts to a Hobson's choice

when you're talking about the school aid bill. Retired Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, knows the stories.

• Are subject to evil machinations. There was, for example, a Senate majority leader who didn't publicly appoint his trio; he told them privately, they met privately and cut the deal, when no one could watch. Once officially appointed, they rammed home their deal before anyone knew what was going on.

There's an advantage to politicians, too, with a one-chamber legislature: Voters couldn't play their little trick of electing a Senate from one party and a House from another, as they have done 80 percent of the time in the last generation.

Good luck, Henry Wolson, with your dream of finding someone who will take over your files and the unicameral project.

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

New Standards Project is common sense approach to school reform

Fixing what's wrong with the schools is not rocket science.

First, you set out in clear and concrete terms what kids are expected to learn. Educators often apply the term "standards" to these expectations as the standard both defines what kids are supposed to learn and how well they are expected to learn it.

Second, you assess — test, if you will — periodically how students actually perform according to the defined standards. Most educators believe the best way to assess student performance is not by computer-scored, multiple-choice questions, but by requiring kids to write actual paragraphs or work out math problems or reason through a tough question.

Third, you report the results of the assessment, school building by school building, and you try to set up some incentives for teachers, principals and other administrators and — importantly — parents. These incentives will encourage teachers to change the ways they teach, prod principals into buying different books and changing curricula, and good parents into checking their kids' homework every night.

Nationally and in Michigan, there have been two major barriers against this common sense program for school reform.

On one hand, ideologues — mostly religious right-wingers, but also including self-styled economists — are fixated on the idea of introducing competition into the public school monopoly and therefore keep pushing for charter schools and tax-supported vouchers to pay for private schools to the exclusion of anything else. Examples of such thinking abound in the minds of the current majority of the State Board of Education.

On the other, a not insignificant minority of teachers and administrators — joined now by religious right-wingers, candidates for local school boards and other politicians — continue to champion "local control" as an argument against coherent educational standards. In Michigan, the attempt to create a statewide core curriculum was shot down last year in the State Board and the Legislature in response to just such thinking.

Possibly the most advanced system of school standards and assessments is something called "The New Standards Project," a consortium of 14 states and seven cities financed by grants from major foundations. Across the country, a handful of cities — San Diego, Pittsburgh, Fort Worth, Rochester — have set up standards borrowed from the New Standards Project. Recently, the chancellor of New York City's schools recommended



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wholesale adoption of New Standards.

If adopted, the New Standards would define content for benchmark achievement tests to be given in the fourth, eighth and 10th grades in math, English, science and "applied learning," which means using skills such as writing and arithmetic in real world settings.

For example, the standards for English in each grade require that each student read 25 books a year, either at home or as part of class assignments, and keep a logbook of titles and short descriptions of the plots.

In math, the emphasis is on problem solving using situations drawn from real life. For example, eighth graders are asked to "analyze a state lottery game to see how many number combinations there are and how many weeks, months or years it will take for all of them to be drawn."

Dr. Rudy Crew, the New York schools chancellor, explained his reasoning: "I am proposing adoptions of the standards developed by the New Standards Project because they are the best available national standards, because teachers can use them, because they are based on common sense as well as academic excellence, and because they are ready now."

What a shame it is in Michigan that we have been arguing about for years how many charter schools can dance on the head of an authorizing pin, when we could have been adopting concrete steps in education reform.

In addition to being chairman of the company that owns this newspaper, Philip Power is a member of the board of the Commission for Skills in the Economy, one of the founding members of the New Standards Project. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1891.

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