

Traffic jams win out over fixing county's potholes

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

In a county where potholes seem to outnumber motor vehicles, what good is a \$70 million traffic management center?

Plenty, according to dignitaries who dedicated the FAST-TRAC Traffic Operations Center Wednesday in the basement of the Oakland Information Technology Building.

Those ubiquitous potholes — that defy patching efforts — were never mentioned during the formal ribbon-cutting ceremony at the county complex, 1200 N. Telegraph.

That is until county commissioner-elect Eric Coleman, D-Southfield, was asked about the center, which features more than

a dozen television screens used to monitor intersections almost instantaneously.

"I wonder how many potholes could be fixed with \$70 million," said Coleman, who takes office next month. He was one of an estimated 200 people attending the ribbon-cutting.

Dennis G. Kolar, managing operating engineer with the road commission, said work crews fill an estimated 1,500 potholes a day. Unfortunately, as soon as one is filled, another surfaces, he said, "especially when the weather changes."

Coleman's question was rhetorical, according to Brent O. Bair, managing director of the Road Commission for Oakland County that oversees both potholes and FAST-TRAC. "It's

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comparing apples and oranges," he said.

For starters, most of the \$70 million used to develop FAST-TRAC over the last five years comes from federal grants, he said. The feds paid about \$50

million with the private sector — including the big three automakers — investing most of the remaining \$20 million.

"Neither the federal grants nor the private investment would have been available for filling potholes," said Bair. The federal dollars and private investment was available because FAST-TRAC is considered the wave of the future for traffic control.

Similar traffic management systems are operational or close to it in Seattle, Los Angeles and other metropolitan areas, Bair explained.

Oakland County invested \$2 million as seed money in 1991, Bair explained, because FAST-TRAC is an innovative way of gathering data. The system —

with cameras and sensors feeding information back to the central computer — is operational at more than 200 intersections in Rochester Hills, Troy, Walled Lake, Novi, Pontiac, South Lyon and Auburn Hills.

Over the next seven years, officials expect to link more than 1,000 intersections to the system, enabling technicians to get up-to-the-minute information with a keystroke.

Bair said the system is credited with:

- Improving traffic flow during peak and nonpeak hours.
- Reducing serious injury accidents.
- Improving emergency response time.

To illustrate how the system

will help average drivers, Bair cited a typical accident scene. Within moments of the mishap, he said, the system will be able to notify drivers of the existing problem and recommend alternate routes, he said.

"So the motorist can go another way, rather than becoming part of the problem," he said.

That time saving information won't be limited to drivers with specially equipped cars, he said. In the near future he envisions it being available on cable television, the Internet or home computers.

That information will also be available to the media, Bair said, who can relay the information to motorists via radio.

Children's protection bill still stalled in the Senate

State Capitol capsules:

The Senate has just a few days in the lame-duck session to act on Rep. Jim Ryan's bill to protect the rights of children conceived in extramarital affairs.

Ryan, R-Redford, is sponsor of House Bill 4669 requiring judges to consider the child's best interests when determining changes in custody or parenting time. A father who has established paternity, but not a parent-child relationship, must prove to a court beyond a reasonable doubt that change of custody is in the child's best interest. The judge must consider whether the biological father has a confirmed parent-child relationship.

"While extramarital affairs are nothing to condone, punishing the child that results is of no use to anyone," said Ryan, who leaves office Dec. 31.

Red faces

State lawmakers like to give school kids a thrill when the entire legislative halls in Lansing by introducing their visitors, having them stand in the

Capitol gallery and receiving everyone's applause. Good PR for the lawmakers, too.

But it backfired Dec. 10 when Rep. Lyn Bankes, R-Redford, received a hand-written note from the lieutenant governor's office which seemed to say a class from "John Adams Elementary School" in Livonia was in the galleries.

Actually, the class was from Jane Addams Elementary School in South Redford and should have been introduced by Rep. Jim Ryan, R-Redford. When the mistake was discovered, the lawmakers sent tour guides to apologize profusely.

"It's never happened in 12 years," said Bankes. "Never in 12 years."

Jane Addams was a 19th Century social worker, famed as the founder of Hull House. Adams was an 18th Century revolutionary leader, diplomat and second president. Livonia school district names elementary schools for presidents.

See CAPSULES, B10

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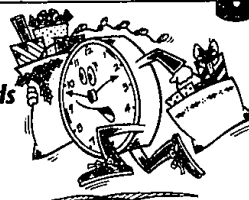
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