

Executive focuses on roads

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

"A dangerous thing happened as I was driving down here tonight. I hit a patch of pavement."

This quip from Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson prompted laughs Saturday at the annual Republican banquet in honor of Abraham Lincoln.

Potholes and other road improvements are expected to be center stage as Patterson delivers his annual State of the County address at the Oakland County Auditorium.

The executive has already announced a plan to go to the voters, if necessary, to raise money for roads repairs and highway maintenance. In tonight's address he's expected to give an update on his plan to launch a petition drive on raising the state's tax on gasoline.

If the drive successfully garnered 300,000 signatures, the state could be voting on raising the gasoline tax this fall.

Just how much of a tax hike is needed is up in the air. The executive initially called for a 6.5-cent increase to raise about \$338 million annually. But on Monday — at a joint press conference with U.S. Rep. Joe Knollenberg — the executive trimmed the hike to 5 cents a gallon, providing state officials could be persuaded to earmark some of the current sales tax on gasoline for roads.

Good roads are crucial to Patterson's vision for Oakland County. As he has said repeatedly, "Businesses won't continue to come to Oakland County if the roads aren't in good shape."

Oakland's roads right now are "deplorable," Patterson said Monday. If the governor and legislators don't move to repair the roads, he will go directly to voters with his petition drive.

The governor and Knollenberg are using other approaches to get new money for roads, Patterson acknowledged. John Engler

was scheduled to lobby Washington for a greater share of federal funds, and Knollenberg was introducing a bill calling for the gasoline tax initiated in 1993 by President Clinton to be dedicated to roads and highways.

"That money is not currently used for highways," Knollenberg said Monday. "It goes into the general fund and is used for other (unrelated) purposes."

If that tax is dedicated to roads and highways, said Knollenberg, Michigan would raise \$200 million annually for road repairs.

Knollenberg said he is confident his bill will merit consideration, particularly once it's supported by others whose states will also benefit.

Patterson tonight is expected to reiterate at the State of the County address that he is ready to act if Washington or Lansing doesn't.

"The executive's address will definitely include something about potholes and the need to fix them," said press secretary Bob Dastman. "Roads (and potholes) won't be the only thing the executive talks about. But that's certainly a high priority."

So far, the reaction to Patterson's proposal for a ballot proposal on raising the gasoline tax has been mixed. County commissioner Sue Ann Douglas, R-Rochester, for example, thinks the need for better roads is obvious and residents would support a higher tax.

"Everybody I talk to is ready to pay higher gasoline taxes," she said. Douglas has already supported a resolution from the

Oakland County Board of Commissioners calling for a 10 cent per gallon increase phased in over three years.

But State Rep. Barbara J. Dobb, R-Union Lake, isn't so sure. "A lot of people complain about the roads," she said. "But very few are willing to pay to fix them."

As for Patterson's pledge to go to the voters if the legislature doesn't act, Dobb hinted that she might welcome the move. "I hope Brooks goes ahead," she said. "I don't think there is widespread support (for a gasoline tax hike). But if Brooks thinks there is, he should go right ahead."

So far, Gov. Engler's office has been relatively quiet about the Oakland executive's threat of petition drive if Lansing doesn't move toward raising money for roads — something Patterson said he intended as "an implied threat."

John Truscott, the governor's press spokesperson, said Engler intends to lobby Washington for more federal dollars before responding to Patterson's plan for a voter referendum. "We haven't seen any specifics," he said. "But the governor won't consider a tax hike until every other option is exhausted."

One person who doesn't put much faith in Washington or Lansing is Rudy Lozano, a Clarkston resident and a member of the Road Commission for Oakland County.

"The feds haven't done a damned thing for Oakland County before," said Lozano, a Clarkston resident. "And state lawmakers haven't got the guts to raise the gasoline tax."

"I think Brooks should just go ahead with his referendum," he'll have plenty of support. Everybody I've talked to says it's about time somebody took some leadership."

Furthermore, there's no time for delay, according to Lozano. "If we wait, we won't have much road base left."



Patterson

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