

Patterson proposes options to state road plan

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

L. Brooks Patterson isn't warring with fellow Republican John Engler over roads.

The Oakland County executive says the governor's roads program was put together in a rush, and is a power grab, by the Michigan Department of Transportation.

"This is MDOT's program," Patterson said of the Engler's so-called "Build Michigan II" program to pump \$570 million into state, county and local roads. "They crunched the numbers over a weekend. John (Engler) went to school Tuesday and Wednesday and announced it on a Thursday."

Patterson is offering his own "reasoned response" with two alternatives — "constructive criticism in a sincere effort to advance the debate."

It is a new tune for Patterson, who in the past has engaged in bitter squabbles with state GOP leaders in his own quest for gubernatorial and U.S. Senate nominations. Recently, Patterson posed for a photo standing in a deep hole in a road that was supposed to represent a pothole but described it as a gag shot. The county executive, a former 16-year prosecutor, has said he isn't interested in running for governor in 1998.

Meanwhile, Engler told a news conference last week that he is warning the Legislature to "stay in session for as long as it takes to pass this plan and fix our roads." The Legislature usually adjourns for the summer by the fourth of July.

Senators opposed

Patterson said the governor's road plan was supported by only four of the state Senate's 22 Republican members last week.

Engler's plan has three elements:

■ \$570 million more revenue. This breaks down into a 4-cent per gallon hike in the fuel tax, higher weight taxes for trucks, and \$200 million more federal aid.

■ Shifting control of 23,000 miles of county and municipal roads to the state, more than tripling the Department of Transportation's jurisdiction to 33,000 miles. In Oakland, it would mean taking control of 770 miles of county roads, other miles of city-village roads, and all the federal aid that goes with them.

■ Auto insurance — requiring drivers to buy less, if they wish, in order to pay for higher fuel taxes.

Chief problem is MDOT's desire to expand its jurisdiction from 9,600 miles of roads to nearly 33,000. Setting aside the money problems, Patterson criticizes the idea because it would also mean MDOT would have to deal with thousands of permits for curb cuts, traffic signals, street signs, sewer digs and so on.

Patterson thinks it would be impossible for MDOT in Lansing to handle all the requests and complaints with no more staff and no intimate knowledge of local gripes.

In the same way Engler says Michigan isn't getting its fair share of federal road funds, Patterson argues that Oakland County is being short-changed even more seriously by the state — a 48-cent return of state funds eligible to be spent in Oakland County for every \$1 of taxes sent to Lansing.

"That's why we insist on an equitable funding formula, in advance, before we buy into the Build Michigan II proposal," Patterson said.



L. Brooks Patterson

Plan A

Patterson's first counter-proposal is to say, go ahead and take control of 23,000 miles of roads — but with three conditions:

■ The state would guarantee Oakland would get 90 percent, instead of 48 percent, of the money it sends to Lansing.

■ Local officials would prioritize the projects because they "are more aware of and closer to the problem."

■ Engler should abandon his plan to give all the "growth" taxes, such as registration fees (up 7 percent a year) and the diesel fuel tax (up 6 percent a year) and throw locals the crumb of the gasoline tax (up just 2 percent a year). He asks equitable treatment in setting up road funds — "fair play, fair play, fair play."

Plan B

His second counter-proposal keeps county and municipal roads under local control but rewrites PA 51 of 1951 road funding formula. The new formula would be based on lane mileage (rather than linear mileage of the roads) and VMT (for vehicle miles traveled).

"Do you know we have roads that carry 40,000 to 70,000 vehicles a day compared to 10,000 in northern Michigan?" Patterson said.

"We would suggest that MDOT take control of all interstates and freeways, which the public assumes they have anyway, and leave to the locals the balance of surface roads," he said.

Brent Bair, managing director of the Oakland County Road Commission, did much of the research for Patterson's plan. Bair said such a formula would shift a lot of northern money into Oakland County.

To prevent a political squabble of "winners versus losers," Bair said the state could agree to "hold harmless" the northern counties while shifting new money southward.

Revenue plans

Patterson and Bair offer two other money-raising plans:



Brent Bair

■ A 5-cent fuel tax increase. They say Engler's assumption he can squeeze another \$200 million out of Washington is politically unrealistic, and that little more than \$50 million will be forthcoming.

■ Shifting 1 percent per year of the sales tax on gasoline out of the general fund and into roads. Gasoline buyers pay the 6 percent sales tax, but that revenue doesn't go to roads, as most drivers assume. The Oakland plan wouldn't shift the sales tax

all at once but at 1 percent, or \$57 million, a year.

"Gas taxes should be for roads, not for other governmental purposes," Patterson said. "The total in new revenues, after four years, would be \$696 million, slightly more than the governor's proposed \$670 million contained in Build Michigan II."

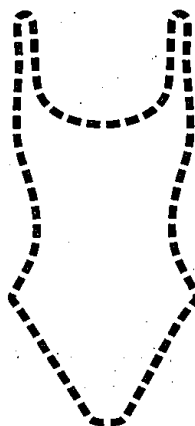
The diverted sales tax would cost public schools money. But Patterson notes that three new Detroit gambling casinos would kick \$65 million a year into the school fund, more than making up the \$57 million loss from the sales tax on fuel.

Patterson prefers Plan B because it would allow more local control.

Currently, Oakland County Road Commission has the only staff members in the state capable of researching alternatives to, and the impact of, MDOT's plan.

Wreck the county road commission, he said, and you leave MDOT with a monopoly of planning power.

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