Officials protest deadline for road funds spending

Local officials are protesting the short deadlines for spending new road money coming from Lansing.

"It's not do-able within the two weeks that are allowed," said Carmine Palombo, summing up the calls he has had from coun-ties and cities in the region.

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"We'll send a letter to MDOT
.Michigan Department of Transportation) that it needs to move
the dates to a more reasonable
time, "soid Palembe, transportation programs director for the
Southeast Michigan Council of
Governments.

Governments.

Palombo spoke at a meeting
Wednesday of SEMCOG's Transportation Advisory Council,
chaired by Brighton Township
Supervisor Andrew Wardach.
The group's consensus was that
the state slapped too many conditions on use of the money.

State's conditions

MDOT director James DeSana, a former Wyandotte mayor, sent local officials a letter last week saying:

Their shares of some new state aid must be "expended by Sept. 30, 1997." That date is specified in Public Act 110.

The work must be under contract by Sept. 15, 1997, must be completed by Dec. 31, 1997." Those dates aren't in PA 110.

■ MDOT would reimburse local units for their expenditures rather than pay out the sums in

advance.

That sum is \$69 million and comes from the Legislature's dipping into the billion-dollar "rainy-day fund." It is a one-time appropriation and doesn't tap the new 4-cents-a-gallon gasoline tax.

DeSana, quoting PA 110, said that money "can only be used for resurfacing and repair of exist-ing roads and cannot be used:

for new construction.

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projects currently under way or
"3) for administrative costs of
the road agency."

the read agency."
Whatever isn't spent by the end of this month, DeSana said, "can be used only for work on federal aid eligible roads as approved by MDOT." Those would tend to be more major roads.

'Impossible'

"It's absolutely impossible to follow the state contract," said C. Neall Schroeder, Troy city engineer. He told the group he had called MDOT, "but we never reached a secretary."

Some unidentified SEMCOG panel members suggested

Some unidentified SEMCOG panel members suggested MDOT doesn't really want to distribute the money.

Senate minority leader John Cherry, D-Clio, blamed the Engler administration for putting unnecessarily stringent conditions on the use of special road funds."

It some that he is activated.

road funds."
"It seems that he is setting up the locals to fail," said Cherry, whose district includes northern Oakland County. "Under this policy, the state will have all of thoir funds and appear to be fixing roads while the locals are struggling to creatively finance road projects under this reimbursoment policy. The governor will then claim that the state does a better job with road repair and try to turn control of local roads over to Lansing."
The \$69 million is to be dis-

local roads over to Lansing."

The \$69 million is to be dis-tributed under a formula in Pub-lic Act 61 of 1951. It awards 29, percent, nearly \$27 million, to the state; the same to counties; and 21.8 percent, more than \$15 million, to cities and villages— something for every road agency in the state.

Palembo said the County

Palombo said the County Roads Association, joined by the Michigan Municipal League, is working with MDOT on the problem.

He noted the Legislature started debate on roads early in spring; that Gov. John Engler offered his program in May; that

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the Legislature didn't pass a nackage until mid-July, the second week into its normal summer break; and that Engler didn't sign the bills until about two weeks age.

SEMCOC, whose members came from saven counties.

SEMCOG, whose members come from seven counties (Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston, Washtenaw, Monroc and St. Clair), is generally unhappy with the meager size of the state's new road package \$275 million a year. They had asked for \$575 million in a June resolution.

Congress on hold

Palombo reported the U.S. House and Senate are working on vastly different versions of mew ISTEA (Intermedal Surface Transportation Act). This is not going to get done by Oct. 1 (beginning of federal and state fiscal years). If it's done by Christmas, we'll be lucky," he said.

said.

In other business, SEMCOG's transportation advisory council recommended the executive committee and General Assembly adopt a \$1.2 billion traffic improvement program (TIP) for the years 1998-2000.

It's a marked reduction from the current \$2.1 billion, in part because ragional planners don't know how much will be coming from the federal ISTEA program. Said a staff memo:
"Total programming for the

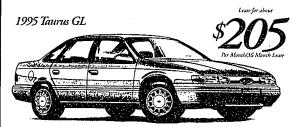
"Total programming for the TIP is \$1.2 billion, Federal fund contributions are \$797.9 million with non-federal matching funds totaling \$495.2 million. This is significantly lower than the cur-rent TIP which has over 700 pro-jects and totals \$2.1 billion."

Palombo cautioned local officials against pinning too much hope on getting demonstration project grants. "Domonstration project statt end up in the legislation, we'll put 'em back in the (TIP) program. But at this point we can't put in demonstration projects for which there is no money."

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