Cultural tax idea gets mixed GOP reaction

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Oakland voters may yet be asked to tax themselves to support regional cultural and scientific efforts like the Cranbrook Institute of Science, the Detroit Zoo or the Detroit Institute of Arts.

But Birmingham attorney David. A. Sebastian predicts extensive organizational changes — and more trust between the city and suburbs — will be needed before Oakland County warms up to the idea.

"I wouldn't say it's impossible that the suburbs would raise taxes to support the DIA, the zoo or Cranbrook. But there would have to be some changes first," he said.

The idea of Oakland residents willingly raising their property taxes came up last week when the president of Detroit Renaissance, who was an influential state lawmaker before leaving the Michigan Legislature, spoke to a group of county Republicans.

Paul Hillegonds, who was Republican Speaker of the House in December when he did not seek re-election, was the featured speaker Thursday when the Vision 2000 club of the Oakland County Republicans held its breakfast meeting at the Fox and Hounds Restaurant in Bloomfield Hills.

Hillegonds was enthusiastic about the role Detroit Renaissance is attempting to play in the revitalization of Detroit.

Individually and as representatives of their corporations, the 47 chief executive officers who make up Detroit Renaissance are strongly committed to the economic revitalization of Detroit, Hillegonds said.

The former lawmaker noted Chrysler's commitment to invest $1.3 billion in manufacturing facilities in Detroit over five years, General Motors' transforming the Renaissance Center into its world headquarters and Ford's partnership in the Fort Motor-UAW training Center.

Hillegonds said he is enthusiastic about Detroit Renaissance because, "Government cannot and should not be the sole agent of reform and change. Increasingly we must rely on public-private partnerships to tackle community challenges."

He also stressed the need for better dialogue between Detroit and the suburbs and the possibility of considering regional efforts to resolve regional problems.

"If we cannot improve the dialogue and cooperation within our metropolitan community on issues like cultural institutions and public transportation," Hillegonds asked, "how will we compete with regions like Minneapolis-St. Paul, Indianapolis or Portland., where tax base sharing and regional growth management strategies are resulting in new investment and prosperity?"

The address was informative, said GOP county chair Cathy Longo. "It also illustrated the cooperative style that made him successful in the Legislature," said Longo, a Troy resident.

During the question and answer period, Sebastian asked about legislative efforts to raise money with tax revenue from Oakland and other suburban communities.

As a member of the legislative committee of the Oakland County Bar, Sebastian said he was aware of legislation introduced by State Sen. Michael J. Bouchard that would enable suburban communities to tax themselves to provide supplemental revenue.

As house speaker, Hillegonds said he was very familiar with the legislation and also knowledgeable about the reason it was not enacted: "Too much opposition from law makers in Oakland and western Wayne counties," he said. "There was too many questions and too many concerns."

But the issue is not dead, Hillegonds insisted.

The legislation can be reintroduced, Hillegonds said, if and when lawmakers have sufficient input from leaders in Oakland and western Wayne.

Bouchard was not present at the breakfast meeting, but Tuesday the Birmingham Republican acknowledged he had introduced an amendment to the Metropolitan Council Act last year. Had it passed, the legislation would have enabled counties like Oakland, Macomb and Wayne to establish a council to oversee — financially and operationally — regional facilities.

That same legislation would enable those counties to raise property taxes by as much as one-half mill (or about 50 cents per each $1,000 assessed valuation) to provide much-needed revenue.

"Grand Rapids uses such an approach for some of its regional problems," Bouchard said.

Bouchard Tuesday emphasized that his proposed legislation would require a vote of the people — preceded by approval by the county board of commissioners in each respective county — before taxes could be raised.

Bouchard said he is ready to reintroduced similar legislation, possibly early next year, if county officials can agree on the language and intent of such a bill.

"Once they work through the language, I'm prepared to work with them," Bouchard said. "But voters would have to approve any tax hike."

Any such legislation — much less a tax hike for Oakland property owners — would face an uphill battle, Sebastian said.

Oakland tax payers are already pay a disproportionate share of tax money for state or regional purposes, Sebastian said. Furthermore, suburban residents may be reluctant to tax themselves for institutions they perceive as "mismanaged."

Even though Sebastian lauded Hillegonds' efforts and the cooperative spirit he espoused, Sebastian countered: "I think he (Hillegonds) might be more effective with ventures that do not require higher taxes in the suburbs."

Civic group's history

Detroit Renaissance, a nonprofit civic group, was organized in the early 1970s in response to the 1967 riots.

Its board of directors, made up of 47 chief executive officers from southeast Michigan's largest employers, meets six times annually.

Its primary function is to promote economic development in Detroit to improve the region's ability to compete. *The organization also reviews* — and voices an opinion on — public policy issues such as the recent increase in Michigan's motor fuel tax and the proposed new federal clean air standards.

Operational funds are provided by membership dues.

Watersheds define pollution fight

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

There's a new and better way to fight pollution, many communities are learning. It's by natural watersheds rather than the artificial lines drawn by governmental surveyors.

And Middle Rouge River communities are doing the pioneer work.

"Water flows downhill. We all live downstream from somebody. Pollution doesn't care about your political boundaries," said Ted Starbuck, of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments staff.

Don Tilton, an Ann Arbor consultant, told a SEMCOG workshop Oct. 23 in Southfield how "we got people from Salem Township, Northville, Novi and Plymouth into one room and got them to work on a plan."

The plan affects Walled Lake, where a branch of the Rouge rises, and Johnson Creek, a Salem Township tributary of the Rouge and a stream so cold it can support a trout population.

"Before we got them together, the river was one of those things that went through town," Tilton said. "Now the Northville mill pond becomes a recreational asset, not a regulatory burden."

The watershed plans are intensely local. "Their plan will be different for one for Garden City," Tilton said.

"Salem identified illegal dumping as a major problem. If I had been doing it, I wouldn't have identified illegal dumping as a problem," Tilton said, praising the local knowledge.

The plans, Starbuck said, deal with "non-point pollution" such as stormwater runoff, failing septic systems, contaminated sites and soil erosion runoff.

Fighting nonpoint pollution by watershed was pushed by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. "EPA hopes to issue a new watershed policy," said Kelly Cave, a Wayne County environmental staffer.

"It is one step down from a regulation. If states don't follow it, they'd better give a pretty good reason," she said.

SEMCOG's General Assembly passed a resolution asking President Clinton to designate the Detroit River as one of 10 "American Heritage Rivers" in 1998 and a "Canadian Heritage River" as well.

Though called a river, the Detroit actually is a strait between Lakes St. Clair and Erie. The name is French for strait.

The Metropolitan Detroit Convention and Visitors Bureau will unveil a new "brand name" marketing strategy Nov. 18, its president, Rick Binford, told SEMCOG delegates.

Metro Detroit consists of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, *Binford said. The focus* will be on tourism, "but what fuels tourism growth and fuel business growth," he added.

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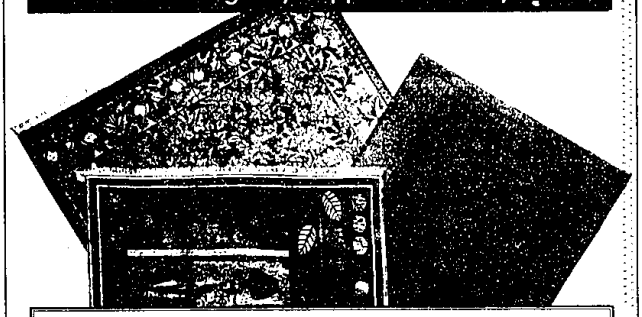

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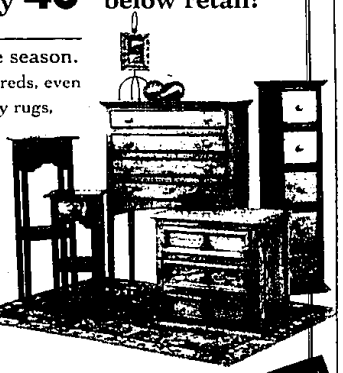

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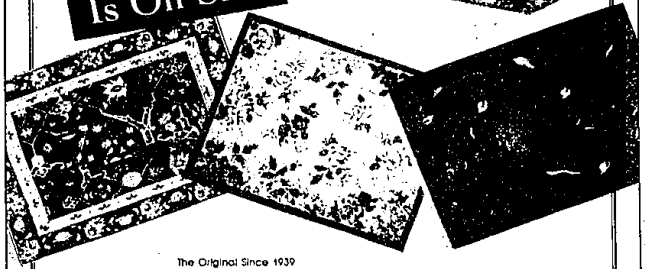

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