

## POINTS OF VIEW

## Engler: Look at budget for the governor's priorities

If you want to know what a politician's real priorities are, forget the window dressing contained in the State of the (you fill in the blank) Speech. Instead, look to the budget when it's finally submitted.

Gov. John Engler provides an instructive example.

In his widely praised State of the State speech at the end of January, the governor made education his top priority, arguing that Michigan had to be a "smart state" to succeed in the economic competition of the future and proposing all manner of innovations in education.

His budget, unveiled last week, had a distinctly different emphasis. In it, Engler recommended giving state prisons a budget hike nearly four times bigger than the one for public universities.

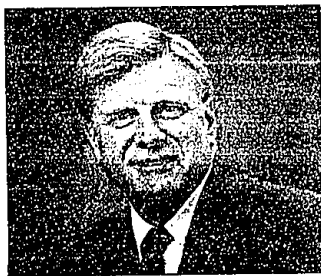
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**Engler called on the Legislature to increase appropriations to the Department of Corrections by \$110 million, more than 8 percent, much of the money going to open 4,712 new prison beds. Fifteen public universities would be guaranteed increases of \$24 million — a 1.5 percent increase — while another seven schools would divvy up an extra \$14 million from a new funding formula.**

wants to spend on higher education. If past priorities are any guide to the future, the Engler budget for 2000 will be the first in Michigan history to spend more money to warehouse criminals than to educate young people.

I don't get it. Or, more accurately, I didn't get it until I read a series of articles recently published in the Atlantic Monthly magazine written by Eric Schlosser.

Taking his text from the famous warning about the "military-industrial complex" in President Eisenhower's 1961 farewell address, Schlosser suggests the real reason behind the enormous increase in prison spending nationwide is the workings of the "prison-industrial complex" — a set of bureaucratic, political and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need. Not a conspiracy, the prison-industrial complex is "a confu-



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ence of special interests that has given prison construction in the United States a seemingly unstoppable momentum."

Schlosser cites these components:

■ Politicians, both liberal and conservative, who regularly pander to a public fearful of crime by voting for new prisons. If you can get them to stand still for a moment, ask your state representative and senator under what circumstances they would vote against prison construction and staffing and for more money for colleges and universities. Don't hold your breath.

■ Poor rural areas, where prisons have become the main engine of economic growth. There are legislators from northern Michigan and the UP who never met a prison they — and their unemployed constituents — didn't like.

■ Private companies riding the current fad for privatization, that regard the \$1.57 billion spent in Michigan on prisons not as a burden on our taxes but as a lucrative market.

■ State government bureaucrats, in charge of ever-increasing pots of money and power.

The data are clear. Nationwide since 1991, the rate of violent crime in America has fallen by about 20 percent, while the number of people in prison has risen by 60 percent.

The logic is unstoppable. If crime is going up, we need to build more prisons. But if crime is going down, it's because we have built more prisons. And, most certainly, building yet more prisons will drive the crime rate down even more.

When the Legislature finally passes the Engler budget, you'll see that growth in state spending on prisons easily will surpass spending on colleges and universities. You may not like it, but at least you'll understand why.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail: ppower@coonline.com

## Urban sprawl? Could it be?

Many environmentalists gasped with delight last month when Gov. John Engler, in his State of the State speech, actually used the words "urban sprawl." In his first eight years, he didn't seem to know the meaning of the term that summarizes how we're eating up open space far faster than our population is growing.

Could it be true? Did a thunderbolt come from Heaven, as it did to St. Paul on the road to Damascus, and convert Engler? Did he suddenly become a believer in preserving our woods and fields and wetlands?

Not quite. Here is the complete quote, with emphasis added: "As we work together to implement Clean Michigan, save farmland and reduce urban sprawl..."

The operative words are "save farmland." Farmers are in agribusiness. Their voices are louder, believe me, than environmentalists'.

**So the Michigan Senate and the Engler administration are getting the message: Development isn't all good. Development isn't the same as economic growth. Development means blacktopping open space and building natural gas-guzzling homes that produce nothing but lawn clippings.**

lower Michigan, and he noted that 16 people died and 72 were hospitalized from eating tainted meat, much of it from Michigan. Then he moved to what was really bugging him:

"The agricultural economy is the lowest it has been since 1929. I hear complaints from farmers that they're selling land to pay their mortgages. I hope agriculture is higher on your priority list next year."

Lannoye nodded: Message received.

The same day, Senate Majority Leader Dan DeGrow, R-Port Huron, announced formation of a Senate task force on agriculture preservation to "examine the status and future of Michigan's second largest industry." Heading it will be McManus, of course, and a member will be Dianne Byrum, D-



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There follows a set of "fact sheets" noting the aging of the farm population. In the middle is a significant environmental fact: "Michigan is losing approximately 118 acres of farmland per day."

That number means little to us suburban computer hackers, so let's explore it. In 5.4 days, Michigan loses a square mile of land. That we can understand. In a year, we lose 67 square miles of land. That's almost two entire townships.

In a decade, we lose 670 square miles, or 18 townships, or more than an average-sized county. That's really a lot of farmland. And it doesn't count woodlands, wetlands and prairies.

Meanwhile, Ladbroke DRC, the state's premier thoroughbred horse track, has shut down as gamblers get sucked in by casinos. That puts a dent in horse raising and the feed business.

DeGrow and McManus go on: "Michigan's apple industry was recently hit hard by competition from cheap imports from China."

Now, any nutritionist, home ec teacher or your own mother can tell you that locally grown food tastes better and is better for you than food shipped from thousands of miles away. Let us not indulge in Asia-bashing. Let's talk nutrition, health, product safety.

So the Michigan Senate and the Engler administration are getting the message: Development isn't all good. Development isn't the same as economic growth. Development means blacktopping open space and building natural gas-guzzling homes that produce nothing but lawn clippings.

Engler has wised up to the need to curb development in order to protect agribusiness. In his catechism, it's known as "imperfect contrition" — doing the right thing because you fear damnation and loss of campaign contributors. "Perfect contrition" would mean doing the right thing because the Creator says so and it benefits your neighbor (Luke 10: 29-37).

Engler isn't fully there on the environmental issue, but he's improving.

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