

POINTS OF VIEW

Engler on right track with job skills priority

With Michigan enjoying the longest sustained economic recovery in half a century and the state treasury looking at a \$400 million surplus this year, Gov. John Engler's State of the State speech last week could not have been difficult to write.

The speech drew generally favorable reviews, even from some Democrats. After all, what politician wouldn't kill to be in office during an economy in which cutting taxes and spending more on pet programs are both possible?

Although the speech covered a long list of topics for legislative action during this election year, Engler's speech concentrated on education, devoting 17 of 40 printed pages to the topic.

The Governor's priorities are right on, because it's now clear that labor shortages and lack of skilled workers are the major barriers to continued good times in Michigan.

At the biannual revenue-estimating conference at the Capitol last week, University of Michigan economist George Fulton said worker shortages are particularly acute in the construction trades and in jobs having anything to do with computer skills. These, in turn, are exactly the jobs that will require training after students leave high school.

That's an area that Engler stressed in his speech. The groundwork was laid down by a commission appointed by Engler last September to study ways to help parents get kids through college. Headed by Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus, the commission found that working class families can't save enough to pay for ever-increasing college tuition bills, while poor families have trouble saving anything.

In the State of the State, Engler proposed two new programs arising from the commission's findings.

For middle income families, the governor wants a new kind of savings account that provides tax breaks for setting aside money for college expenses. The Michigan Education Trust (MET) program, the first prepaid college tuition plan in the country when it was adopted in 1988 during the Blanchard Administration, has turned out to be too expensive for most families.

Engler's college savings plan would allow parents or grandparents to set aside a nest egg to pay for college expenses and deduct up to \$3,000 from their incomes subject to Michigan income tax. The money would build up, with taxes deferred, until families needed the cash. If approved, the deferral would complement a federal tax break already in effect. In the federal income tax code's 527 Accounts, when the money is withdrawn it is taxed at the student's rate, not the parent's. Given the fact that federal rates vary from 15 percent to nearly 40 percent,



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this could be a terrific savings.

For families that earn less than \$40,000 a year, Engler wants a new program that provides two years of free tuition at Michigan community colleges. Once again this makes sense. Learning to be a stone mason or a finish carpenter doesn't require a degree in philosophy from the U-M, while community college course catalogues are chock-filled with courses in computer technical subjects and information technology.

Engler also proposed a number of other initiatives in the skills arena, including:

■ Operation Fast Break, a set of worker training programs through community colleges and high schools to teach employees who need it "reading, writing, computer skills and the personal discipline needed in the workplace."

■ Partnership for Adult Learning, which would provide career and job counseling to Michigan residents through Michigan Workforce Service centers, schools, colleges and libraries.

■ Increasing spending on adult education from \$80 million to \$100 million.

■ Michigan Technical Excellence Program, a "skills credentialing system" to show when Michigan workers have received training in specific technical areas.

Much of the thinking behind this part of Engler's speech is coming from Dr. Barbara Bolin, whom Engler recruited from Texas to be the head of the newly created Department of Career Development. For a bureaucracy-slasher like Engler, creating an entirely new department of state government provides ample proof the importance these issues hold in the governor's mind.

As someone who served as the chair of Michigan Job Training Coordinating Commission in the 1980's, it's nice to see that notions of investing in the skills and human capital of Michigan's workers are getting higher and higher.

After all, what politician wouldn't kill for an environment in which cutting taxes and spending more on pet programs are both possible on the state's agenda?

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 at ppower@homecomm.net

Give Home Rule bill a decent burial

One of the main reasons that there is such mistrust of government, especially at the state and national level, is that officeholders often misrepresent their intentions in literature printed and mailed at public expense. Such was the case with the recent newsletter sent out by our Farmington/Farmington Hills state Rep. Andrew Raczkowski.

In that newsletter, the representative again makes the claim that his co-sponsored House Bill 4777 is not a threat to municipal government home rule. He makes the claim despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary: HB 4777 is a frontal attack on the ability of local governments to continue to protect its citizens in some 21 areas that are now covered by home rule protections.

Every person or group that has studied HB 4777 came away with the same conclusion that the bill is destructive to local government. For instance:

The Michigan Municipal League, to which our two cities belong, referred to HB 4777 as "The Local Government Destruction Act of 1999."

The Grand Rapids Press called the bill "The Home Rule Elimination Act."

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments based its opposition "on the bill's potentially broad impact on the ability of local government officials to shape and manage their communities on behalf of their residents. . . ."

In its current form, HB 4777, while limited to a handful of topics, still would strip away the ability of local elected officials to fine tune the character of their communities, whether that involves highway signage, building construction codes, certain health codes or other specified, critical areas.

The crowning argument against HB 4777 came when Farmington and Farmington Hills attorney John Donohue, highly respected throughout the state, gave the cities an opinion confirming our worst fears: that the bill would preempt many areas currently under local control.

One example of a local ordinance that could be wiped out by HB 4777 is the Farmington Hills measure that allowed the city to oppose and prevent an oil company from drilling in the heavily populated southwest area. Since that ordinance was stronger than state law the local ordinance could be wiped

GUEST COLUMN



ALDO VAGNOZZI

out under HB 4777's intent of applying the less strict code to all local governments.

Local governments marched on Lansing a few months ago and staged a rally led by Farmington Hills in opposition to HB 4777.

Joining us in opposition were the Western Wayne Council of Governments, the South Oakland Mayor's Association, the Western Michigan Grand Valley Metro Council, as well as scores of mayors and township officials too numerous to mention.

There were more than 100 communities represented.

We came back in October to testify against the bill at a hearing before the Employment Relations, Training and Safety Committee of the House of Representatives, a hearing that Mr. Raczkowski claims hasn't been held.

In the face of this overwhelming evidence that HB 4777 is extremely dangerous to the health of our local communities, Mr. Raczkowski falls back on another political trick - blame someone else for your own problems.

In this case the state representative takes a whack at local officials, including those of our two cities, for daring to point out that his bill is dangerous to the health of our communities. I applaud our local officials for doing just that. If they weren't trying to defeat this bill then they wouldn't be doing their job, called for in the city charter, to protect the health and safety of our residents.

The state representative further claims that our city officials are failing to acknowledge the legislative process. Actually, the problem for Mr. Raczkowski is that our city officials do know the legislative process and used it to put a stop to a bill that would have driven a stake into local government.

The message should be clear to our state representative: in pushing for passage of this bill you are not representing the two cities in your district.

The only decent thing to do is hide this bill in committee and then give it a decent burial.

Aldo Vagnozzi is a community activist and former mayor and longtime council member in Farmington Hills.

BRING US YOUR CAR LOAN:
Get \$50 and No Payments until April

If you have a vehicle financed through a dealer or another financial institution, we'll pay you \$50 to refinance it with us. (Minimum loan amount \$5,000.)

Besides the \$50, your first payment won't be due until April. You'll end up skipping one, maybe two monthly payments. That should help you deal with those holiday bills!

Act now - this offer ends February 29. Call a consumer loan specialist at 248-569-1700 or 734-453-4212 to apply or to find out how easily you can become a Telcom Credit Union member and take advantage of all of our services.

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HomeTown Heroes
OF OAKLAND COUNTY

Your Observer & Eccentric, Mirror, and HomeTown Newspapers, in conjunction with The Volunteer Place, have established the HomeTown Heroes™ awards to recognize, encourage and reward outstanding volunteers who have given selflessly of themselves to support, nonprofit organizations in Oakland County.

The Volunteer Place will be North Oakland County's new one-stop shop for volunteer recruitment and placement, coming Fall 2000.

HomeTown Heroes™ will honor volunteers in six categories: Seniors (65 and over), Youth (18 or younger), Board/Committee, Direct Service, Faith-based and Business. The business award is sponsored by Crain's Detroit Business.

Nominees and awardees will be recognized at a luncheon on March 29 at the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham.

NOMINATION FORM

NAME OF NOMINATOR _____
IF GROUP, CONTACT PERSON _____
ADDRESS _____
DAYTIME PHONE _____ FAX _____

CATEGORY FOR WHICH YOU ARE NOMINATING THE VOLUNTEER:
Senior (65 and over) Board/Committee Direct Service Faith-based Business Youth (18 or younger)

NOMINEE: _____
(Must volunteer for an Oakland County non-profit)

ADDRESS _____ PHONE _____
AGE _____ (If senior, just note over 65)
DAYTIME PHONE _____ SCHOOL (if applicable) _____
PLACE(S) OF VOLUNTEER SERVICE _____
YEARS OF SERVICE _____ AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS PER MONTH _____
TYPE OF WORK PERFORMED _____

On a separate sheet, please describe, in 100 words or less, why you have nominated this individual for a HomeTown Hero™ Award. Entries must be typewritten. CAUTION: The 100-word limit will be strictly applied. Anything beyond the hundredth word will not be presented to the nominating committee. ("a", "and", "an", and "the" will not be counted as words).

Entries must be received by Friday, February 25, 2000.
Mail forms to: HomeTown Heroes™ Awards—THE VOLUNTEER PLACE
c/o 114 Orchard Lake Rd, Pontiac, MI 48341 or Fax to (248) 858-7112

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