

# Engler poised to launch state's next big industry

The title of Gov. John Engler's State of the State speech last week was "Building the Next Michigan." The idea was to frame a series of economic development proposals as steps needed to transform Michigan's economy, but it got lost in the usual wel-



Phil Power

ter of ideas that get tossed out in such speeches. To understand the thrust of what Engler is proposing, a very, very short version of Michigan's economic history might be in order.

Up to the development of the auto industry at the start of the 20th century, much of Michigan's economy was based on profitable extraction of natural resources. Fur traders ran a highly profitable business centered on Mackinac Island in the 18th century. The rich copper and iron deposits in the Upper Peninsula were discovered about the same time and proved enormously profitable.

The capital so formed financed in the 19th century the lumbering of the white pine forests throughout northern Michigan. It's a fact that more money came out of our white pine forests than was ever made from the famed California gold fields. Profits made from logging, in turn, financed entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford and led to the development of the automobile, now our dominant industry.

For years, economists, entrepreneurs and politicians have speculated on what the next big industry might be and how to encourage it to take root in Michigan. Attention has centered in recent years on the parallel revolutions now taking place in cellular biology and information technology.

It's in this context that we should understand Engler's recent proposals.

To encourage businesses in "emerging fields" — life sciences, micro-systems and information technology — the governor wants to "put out the welcome mat and exempt them from Michigan's state business tax."

Conservative ideologues chanting allegiance to "pure market forces" have attacked the idea as "industrial policy." But nearly all new business start-ups don't pay a cent of the Single Business Tax, which itself is in the process of being phased out over the next 20 years. So why not make a symbolic gesture of welcome to entrepreneurs

who start companies here?

Engler also wants to create an unfortunately named "Cybercourt," which allows "e-filing." Web-based conferencing and virtual courtrooms" that would resolve legal disputes entirely over the Internet.

What the governor is really getting at is trying to find a way for Michigan to become the standard-setter for deploying new technology in the legal arena for new corporations. Just the way Delaware has become the legal standard for old economy corporations. Almost all large companies in America are incorporated under the Delaware corporation law, which is clear, flexible and easily interpreted. Delaware lawyers prosper, and corporations often put down headquarters to take advantage of the favorable legal climate.

Few — certainly not Vice President Al Gore — are aware that scientists at an organization called "Internet 2" are feverishly developing the next generation of the Internet in rented and overcrowded facilities in Ann Arbor. Engler wants the Michigan Economic Development Corporation to find a way to provide them with a permanent home to retain the awesome potential of future Internets here in Michigan.

Lots of companies are in the business of providing ways to move information, whether by copper wire (DSL services, for example) or fiber optic lines or through broadband cable TV. Municipalities, however, often control the rights of way and the licenses required to add to the information network.

Dealing with local governments can be slow and often litigated. Sometimes access fees are unreasonably high. Engler wants the Public Service Commission to go after these "broadband bandits."

None of these proposals is politically sexy. Some of them are hard to understand without bearing in mind that the objective is to help transform the Michigan economy. And it's both hard and tricky to figure out just how to encourage development of what just might be the next big industry that transforms Michigan's economy.

But Gov. Engler is trying, and he should get high marks for it.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments either by e-mail at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net), Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net).

# Many voices heard in zoning call



William Hartsock

Much has been written and said about the city council's recent decision to approve a rezoning request received from a Farmington resident and downtown business owner to allow the relocation of a well-respected drapery design studio to the edge of our historic district. This type of land use has produced positive results on the east side of our downtown and is common in many historic downtowns.

Unfortunately, too much of what has been written and said by those opposed to the rezoning has been inaccurate, misleading and mean-spirited. This city has a well-earned reputation for progressive and effective municipal management. The administration and staff work hard to deliver high quality public services. In truth though, the hallmark (and backbone) of Farmington government has always been community service performed by ordinary citizens with an extraordinary commitment to making local government work.

The simple fact is, although city council is responsible for the final decision, council's decision actually is the last of several decisions made by various groups of Farmington residents serving on the planning commission, board of zoning appeals and the historical commission, all of which were favorable to the proposed rezoning.

In 1997 the planning commission began the lengthy and in-depth project to update and revise the city master plan. The master plan is the city's foundational land use document. Considerable research, study, review, a public hearing and debate preceded its adoption. Three properties immediately adjacent to the west side of downtown were identified for future rezoning to central business district. One has been used as an office for many years. Another has a history of commercial use (it's presently occupied as a residence). The remaining prop-

erty, 33432 Oakland St., is the one for which rezoning was recently requested.

The proposal for rezoning was first presented to the historical commission. In a regular public meeting attended by the entire commission membership (many of whom live in the historic district), the rezoning proposal was unanimously endorsed, without objection, by the commission. We find the historical commission's unanimity compelling in light of its special mission and perspective.

The matter was next presented to the board of zoning appeals requesting two variances to allow for three shared, off-site parking spaces and permit a landscape barrier instead of a brick masonry wall. Following considerable public

**■ The goal is to make informed decisions that are in the best interest of the community.**

discussion, including a public hearing, the board approved the requested variances.

We believe the group of community volunteers regularly using its experience in deciding such issues for the betterment of the entire community must be given considerable weight. Moreover, we believe the board's decision provides further justification for support of the rezoning request.

This rezoning proposal was presented to the planning commission on two occasions, first for preliminary consideration of the site plan and rezoning request and again for final consideration of the site plan and recommendation to city council. At the planning commission meeting of Jan. 8, during a public hearing, a row-by-row and chair-by-chair opportunity was provided for everyone to comment on the rezoning request. Ultimately the commission voted 8-1 to recommend that city council approve the request. During as rezoning the master plan, quality of the proposed use of the property and the character and reputation of the resident/business owner.

In the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, the community group that worked long

and hard to update the master plan, and which is responsible for reviewing site plans and such requests on behalf of the community, is entitled to a presumption of good judgment based on its record of distinguished service to the community.

Who are the community volunteers who serve on the historical commission, planning commission and board of zoning appeals? They come from every area of our community and are all residents of Farmington. They are architects, attorneys, educators, a city planner, homemakers and retirees. All have a common goal of serving in the best interest of our community.

Before the final vote, the city council took into account the decisions and recommendations of the boards and commissions involved in this matter. In addition, council reviewed the master plan, zoning ordinances, state law, council goals and mission statement (which includes maintaining the city's "economic vitality and pleasing aesthetics" and "preserving its historical character and charm") and listened to the concerns and opinions of all residents. Letters and a petition were read; telephone calls were made and received; and individual discussions were held with residents. These were all important elements in making an informed decision.

With any controversial decision there will be criticism. The claim that city council did not listen during its consideration of this matter is patently false. In fact, council considered factors in addition to those presented by the opponents of the request. Presumably, because some disagree with this decision, they have chosen to discredit the process and those involved.

The Farmington City Council and administration have a well-known history of supporting inclusive and constructive citizen involvement. Major decisions are reached after broad community input and support. Unanimity is always possible. The goal is to make informed decisions that are in the best interest of the Farmington community. We believe this has been achieved.

William S. Hartsock is the mayor of Farmington.

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