

Is Engler's budget a booby trap for the next governor?

"Après nous le déluge" (after us the deluge) is what Madame de Pompadour is supposed to have remarked to the French King Louis XV in 1757, after the defeat of the French and Austrian armies by Frederick the Great in the battle of Hohenberg. The "deluge," of course, was the end of the French monarchy and aristocracy of the ancient regime.



Phil Power

I felt the remark seemed especially apt after I spent several hours reading the fine print of the state budget submitted last week by Gov. John Engler. There are so many accounting tricks, fund transfers and accelerated tax payments involved in constructing a "balanced" budget for fiscal 2003 that I pity the poor soul who has to face the deluge of red ink and balance the state's books in 2004.

Consider:

■ Property tax collections for 2003 get a one-time acceleration to get per-pupil K-12 spending up to \$6,700. By the time the tax bills hit next July, this November's elections will be but a memory.

■ The state school aid fund looks as though it's getting a 12 percent increase, mainly because Engler's budget credits to it federal payments that usually go to the Department of Education.

■ Around \$80 million in an unemployment compensation contingency fund will get transferred to the schools.

■ Another contingency fund, around \$250 million for Medicaid, will be cut in half, with the balance used for other purposes.

■ The state's rainy day fund, which had a \$1.3 billion balance just two years ago, will be drained to just above \$250 million. Anything less would have caused an automatic halt to the cuts in the state's single business tax, something tax-cutter Engler doesn't want on his record as he leaves office.

■ The \$35 million originally budgeted to pay for the Build Michigan road bonds will go instead to fund the Department of Transportation.

■ A bit more than half of the \$14 million in an environmental emergency cleanup fund will prop-

up the Department of Environmental Quality.

After 12 years in office, the governor has had plenty of time to learn about all the nooks and crannies in the state's financial accounting system. He sure used them all this time around!

One hopes the school aid fund, which depends on a combination of property, sales and income taxes, will recover as the Michigan economy improves after the recession. But the general fund depends on income and business taxes, which typically lag after a recession. And changes in the federal estate tax will cost the state more than \$50 million in 2003, not to men-

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tion the cuts in money for road construction that President Bush wants in his own federal budget.

The worry is that Michigan's recovery from the recession will be low and slow, especially given weakness in the automobile industry and in manufacturing generally. The hope is that there won't be a big, unexpected emergency that requires big time state spending.

In any event, I expect the Republican-dominated state legislature to pass the Engler budget with a minimum of fuss, thereby preserving the governor's legacy as a tax cutter and budget balancer.

But in the back of my mind is another more cynical and utterly unprovable suspicion. Could it be that in preparing his last budget, Gov. Engler has all but written off the chances a Republican will be elected his successor? Otherwise, why prepare a budget that so recklessly risks pushing off the awful day of financial reckoning onto the administration of some Democratic governor?

Over the years, many outgoing governors and presidents have delighted in laying booby traps for their unwary successors, and Engler — always shrewd and partisan — just might be looking forward to a last laugh.

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Hugh Gallagher

History large and small helps us understand now

She was adamant. "Why should I waste my time reading about some old past

that doesn't have anything to do with me and be reminded about how bad things were?" she said.

It's something you hear from the young. They live for the now. The future is a little murky, a little scary, let's party now and think about that later. The past is boring, over, done with and doesn't have anything to do with us.

We were discussing a particular book, but we could have been discussing history itself and literature. If that book was irrelevant then so were all those other old, long books about places and people and times that weren't anything like us, like now.

She made her point forcefully. I admired her forthrightness, but I cringed at her argument.

History in all its complexities tells us what we need to know about who we are. You can't understand now, without understanding then.

This past Sunday The Observer Newspapers began a monthly feature on local history. Each of our communities has its own rich history, its own battles, its own "historic figures." We often think of history in the grand scale: the Norman Conquest, the Napoleonic Wars, the Civil War, the Great Depression. But history is what happened in places great and small.

Local history is sometimes just local: the first settlers, learning at a one-room schoolhouse, a devastating fire or tornado, changes that came with a rail stop or a freeway. Sometimes local history has wider consequences: area men and women who marched off to war; a governor from one of our communities, Fred Warner of Farmington; a stop on the Underground Railroad spiriting runaway slaves to freedom; a company, Burroughs or Daisy Air Rifles, that became nationally famous.

Preserving our history is very important to many in our communities. They work hard at local history societies and museums collecting, conserving and interpreting the artifacts of our past.

As Brian Golden, vice president of the Farmington Historical Society, says of his desire to draw young people into history, "I like sharing my passion for history and passing it along to the community."

On Monday the Plymouth Historical Museum held a grand opening for its outstanding collection of Abraham Lincoln materials. It is the Lin-

coln collection, sold to the museum by Dr. Weldon

Petz, that led to the building of the museum. And while the Lincoln exhibit is the third largest in the country, it will be only one part of the museum. The museum's primary focus is and will continue to be on local history.

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At the grand opening, several exhibits related the Lincoln collection to local history. In 1862 Company C of the 24th Michigan mustered in Plymouth. The 24th would go on to make history on the battlefields of the Civil War.

Earlier in his life, Lincoln took out a patent for a method to extricate boats from shoals. He was inspired after seeing a boat stuck near Fighting Island in the Detroit River.

Beth Stewart, the museum's director, and her group of volunteers have done a wonderful job of displaying, interpreting and honoring Dr. Petz's fascinating collection. And she has plans for using the recently expanded museum to tell the equally exciting story of the Plymouth community and its place in the grand and simple scheme of things.

History large and small. Local history museums and their dedicated group of volunteers preserve the seemingly insignificant which is often the very core of understanding who we were, how we lived, what we valued.

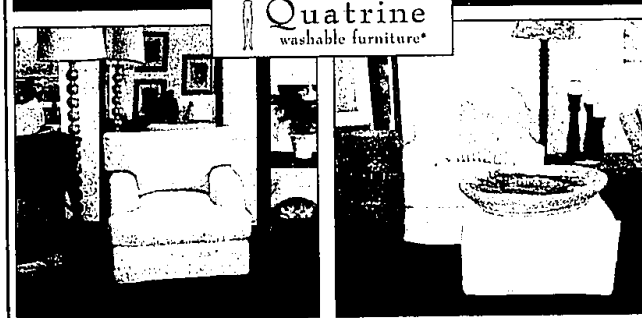
One famous collector of such refuse had a significant impact on our local history and on our understanding of what history is. Henry Ford once testified in court that "History is bunk." But he understood that the common objects of our lives were as important as battles and needed to be preserved, just as we need to preserve the stories of "ordinary" people. Not all history is politics, disaster and war.

Newspapers are in a sense history on the fly. They become source material for future historians. We hope we do our part in preserving our rich local history.

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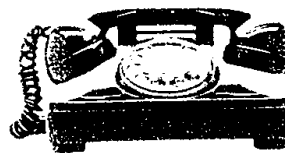


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