

# John Engler's political savvy merits Michiganders' respect

Just a few days, Gov. John Engler will leave office, certainly the most effective Michigan governor in the last half-century. He has never been interested in being well liked, and so his great accomplishments often brought with them a dark underside of unpopularity: Drastic overhaul of the structure of school finance, achieved in part by demoting teachers and their unions. Repetitive tax cuts, which in recessionary times left the state budget with a massive structural deficit. Far-reaching — some would say cold hearted — welfare reform. Shaping of an activist — and very conservative — judicial body. A consistent — some would say mindless — devotion to anti-abortion politics and Right To Life. A vast expansion of the unilateral powers of the governor.

On balance, the record is extraordinary. Michigan citizens are not likely to see a governor like John Engler for many, many years.

I have always been struck by his physical presence. Hardly handsome, Engler is a large, fleshy man with short legs and a sharply receding hairline. His posture when sitting — tilted on the edge of the chair, his leg thrust diagonally forward — leaves no doubt of his direct, aggressive engagement. His eyes are quick and appraising, his hand movements decisive. He is not a particularly effective public speaker, but in private he speaks rapidly, carries hard conviction and, if crossed, a certain menace. And for a man with no particular claims as an intellectual, his grasp of the minutiae of policy and the byways of politics is amazing.

His capacity to see an opening, to strike suddenly, and to be ruthless in the exercise of power is unparalleled in my experience. He keeps reminding me of William Blake's famous line, "how stealthily the crouch, how silent the leap." The case of John Kelly is instructive. A lawyer and former Democratic state senator, Kelly is widely regarded as very bright, but also the loosest of cannons and the quickest of lips. He also was a thorn in Engler's side both in and out of the senate.

Elected to the Board of Governors of Wayne State University a couple of years ago, Kelly also represented the Detroit Medical Center, which does a lot of business with WSU. Earlier this month, Engler unearthed a neglected passage in the state constitution that empowered a governor to remove a public official from his job on grounds of conflict of interest. He called for Kelly's resignation and scheduled a hearing on his conflict.

Last week, Kelly resigned, a victim of the ruth-

less, capable use of political power. And then, unexpectedly, Engler appointed Eugene Driker, a long-time Democrat and enormously thoughtful and respected lawyer, to take Kelly's place. On balance, the appointment strengthened Wayne's board. What a testament to the ambivalent outcomes of the shrewd!

In recent weeks, I've had the privilege of dealing with John Engler and to see at close range the sweep of his capability. I'm the chair-elect of the Michigan chapter of the Nature Conservancy, and when 390,000 acres of precious forestland in the Upper Peninsula came on the market several months ago, it was obviously a once-in-a-lifetime conservation opportunity. But the deal was vast; the rumored price was in the range of \$160 million.

We contacted Gov. Engler and his able chief of staff, Sharon Rothwell, to ask for help. They jumped into action without a pause. Engler announced his support for the deal and urged an unprecedented public-private collaboration to raise the money. He got the Natural Resources Trust Fund to pledge \$10 million to support our bid. He wrote President Bush, asking favorable consideration for funding from the federal Forest Legacy program. He made phone calls to the property owners, a trust in Hawaii.

And he invited the heads of the biggest foundations in Michigan to lunch in the governor's office never will forget the sight of the Governor of Michigan padding around his big conference room, personally serving coffee and pie to his guests, while arguing that the land was simply too important to the future of Michigan to let it go to hard timbering and piecemeal development. And the foundations came through quickly, big time.

It's too early to say whether we'll succeed. But we couldn't have got where we are now without the passionate, sudden, capable, detailed involvement of John Engler. In my book, at least, he leaves office maybe not with my full agreement but without doubt my full respect.

Phill Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at ppower@homecomm.net.



Paul Pace

# Taj Mahal on outside, Sam's will still be Sam's

Farmington Hills will soon be having a Sam's Club built in Phase 1B of the "golden triangle" project of the North Orchard Place, located between Orchard Lake and Northwestern Highway.

It will neighbor with a handsome looking Home Depot set to open in January.

The Hills City Council has a say in the project's design since the land is zoned under a planned unit development.

Council members put the architects for the next phase through the wringer, coming up with a design that meets their vision of a neo-classical shopping district with lots of pretty landscaping.

Council member Veld Barnett didn't want to see carts scattered all about the parking lot and more appealing cart corrals for this Sam's Club.

Council's Jerry Ellis wanted more windows in the faux second floor roof. He didn't want so many parking spaces since he said most of them never seem to be more than one-third full.

Manager Steve Brock wanted windows near the front entrance, but that's likely not going to happen.

In other words, let's make this Sam's Club look like it's something it's not.

No doubt about it, this Sam's Club will probably be the Taj Mahal of bulk membership retail in the country.

That's not a bad thing. But when you go inside, it's still going to be a warehouse with product on shipping carts.

So I guess what the city has done is put a heavy dose of lipstick on a concrete box.

We all know there's little ambience inside a Sam's Club or a Costco membership market. Their appeal to the consumer is bulk savings.

Got a family of 12? You're in business at these places. A tub of peanut butter sells for only \$7.99.

It's just a little disconcerting to think the outside of these stores will be more appealing than the inside.

Box stores have the same layout no matter what state you're visiting.

I've been to northern Virginia recently and the only difference in the chain store landscape there compared to here are the food markets. We've got Farmer Jack's; they've got Food Lion and used to have the one I really got a kick out of: Super Fresh. Now that's what I call an opti-

The homogenization of retail in the U.S. was inevitable; mom and pop stores never had a chance to compete with bulk retailers of Wal-Mart, Kmart and Target and the chain drug stores all competing for your dollar on toilet paper. It was an inevitable part of free commerce, but it's kind of sad, too.

Just once, wouldn't we all like to go to a store and be surprised when we walk inside?

Otherwise, everything else is pretty close to the same. Same stores, same layouts.

Has it come to this? Even when you're away from home nowadays you're really never away.

We all know where to find the toothpaste in a Target. Plunk me down in a Utah Target, I won't even have to ask.

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Imagine the adventure of not knowing a thing about a store.

I can dream, can't I?

But for now, I can say I work in a city with a soon-to-be prettiest-looking Sam's Club in the country.

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