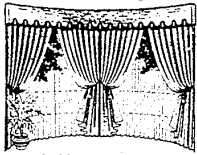


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## Candidates differ on sales tax removal

By TIM RICHARD

A partial repeal of the sales tax has emerged as one of the few hard differences between two moderate candidates for governor—incumbent Republican William Milliken and Democratic challenger Sander Levin. Milliken opposes Proposal C on the Nov. 5 ballot which is aimed at amending the Michigan constitution to repeal the four per cent sales tax on groceries and a two per cent tax on prescription drugs. Still taxed would be "prepared" foods and alcoholic beverages.

Levin, a former state senator, favors the proposal, put on the ballot by a petition drive conducted by the Michigan Citizens Lobby.

Their chief differences are (1) how the lost revenue would be made up and (2) how bad a revenue source the sales tax really is. The candidates discussed the proposal in lengthy interviews with the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Editorial Board.

MILLIKEN CONCEDES that the sales tax on food and drugs is what economists call "regressive" — it takes a larger percentage of low incomes than of high incomes.

"But you've got to look at the total impact of our tax program, which is very progressive," said Milliken, pointing to the state income tax with its program of family exemptions and credits.

"You need a mix of taxes — income, sales and property."

"If we were to remove the sales tax and go to the corporate income tax

for the difference, a great degree of volatility would be introduced into our tax picture," said the governor, referring to the tendency of corporate profits (and taxes) to fluctuate greatly with the business cycle.

LEVIN CONTENDS that "Michigan is one of only two industrial states in the union with a sales tax on food and drugs" — the other being Illinois. "New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and the others have been able to do it without a sales tax on food."

Levin agrees that the "main problem with the income tax (as an alternative revenue source) is in the corporate sector, not personal income taxes." But he disagrees with Milliken that other taxes must be increased to make up for loss of sales tax revenue if Proposal C passes.

"The loss of revenue is only \$165 million, not the \$200 million Milliken says," Levin began.

"First, I would favor postponing the further reduction of the inventory tax. That's \$40 million revenue there."

"Second, we've got to look at welfare and other programs. Just because some programs are working, it doesn't mean every program is working," he said, listing a re-evaluation of the state budget as his top priority if elected governor.

"Third, we're going to have a surplus in the budget this year."

"IRRESPONSIBLE," Milliken shot back.

"The revenue loss will be \$200 million or more. Sander Levin is saying we can have the best of both worlds — cutting \$200 million from revenues and saving money in the budget. Irresponsible."

Milliken continued, "There's absolutely no assurance that the savings on food and drugs (from repeal) would be passed onto the consumers."

As for cutting the budget, Milliken said his administration is implementing recommendations to prevent overpayment of welfare and to keep unqualified persons from receiving it.

"A SHAM argument," counters Levin. "I don't buy Milliken's argument that the tax cut won't be passed down to consumers. Hell, he didn't say that when the federal auto excise tax cut was passed."

"There's no more competitive industry than retail food, especially in the Detroit area," Levin said.

Levin also contends that Milliken is doing something about soaring welfare costs only because this is an election year. "The government is being forced to look at welfare by the federal government, by welfare's sheer size and its pressure," he said.

Fiscal experts say the sales tax on food and drugs produces about one-fifth of all sales tax revenues. So the ballot proposal as worded would also "compensate" units of government, other than the state, for the resulting loss of revenue by increasing each per cent allocation of sales tax revenue to such units by one-fifth.

Sales tax revenues support not only state government but are returned to local units. School districts, for example, get half the sales tax revenue, and cities, townships and villages get one-eighth.

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