

How Citizens Lobby gets string of new laws

EDITOR'S NOTE: Michigan Citizens Lobby has had a lot of public attention on its activities but virtually nothing about how it operates. Its chief activities are sub-urbanites. Here is the inside story of MCL's workings.

By TIM RICHARD

The first time Doug Ross and Barbara Grossman went to Lansing to register as lobbyists, the little old lady in the Secretary of State's office demanded "Whom do you represent?"

Citizens Consumers, they answered.

"I'm a citizen, and you don't represent me," she snuffed, and refused to register them.

LATER THEY got themselves registered by mail. Since that day in January 1973, the team of Ross and Grossman—known locally as "Michigan Citizens Lobby," a non-profit corporation—has run up a long string of successes, lobbying and campaigning for consumer and tax issues.

"Our first three projects," said Ross, "were the amendment of the lame duck legislator's travel rules, the generic drug prescription law and the used car buyer protection bill."

"In the summer of '73, we began the petition drive to repeal the sales tax on food and drugs (approved by voters). That took us through '74."

Since then, there have been the auto-repairman licensing law and a start on "sun-belt" laws for state agencies.

For the second straight election, MCL has a proposition on the Nov. 2 ballot—Proposition 13 to cut income taxes for 85 percent of the population and raise them for 15 percent through a graduated income tax.

BY THEIR design, the only names ever heard on MCL's television news newscasters are Doug Ross and Barbara Grossman.

Were the public names, said Mrs. Grossman, "but we're not the reason the thing is successful. We're the tip of the iceberg."

Said Ross: "We say we have in excess of 30,000 members. We don't charge membership dues. A member is someone who says, 'I want to be involved with your group. They get materials and petitions—about two mailings a year for the whole membership.'"

It's clearly a loose kind of membership. It floats from issue to issue. I suppose we have a hard core of 3,000 to 10,000.

Putting Proposition 13 on the ballot required 325,000 petition signatures. That put the number of circulators at 10,000 to 15,000.

That's a great check on a group like ourselves—the willingness of 10,000 or 15,000 people to work. I can't compel them to do anything," Ross said.

MCL HAS no local chapters. There are no membership meetings, conventions, elections. There is no formal survey of the entire body.

The admitted looseness of membership has led more than one political observer to wonder if MCL isn't just two persons and a slash fund.

The short answer is that MCL is run by a nine-member board, meeting for an evening every three weeks or so. For an organization with such immense political clout, MCL's board consists of political unknowns.

Chairman Fred Stenhardt, a Detroit lawyer; Michael Firoz, a Detroit salesman; Ray Kruepel, a paper company employee from Taylor; Harry Lester, a steelworker from Rockwood; Julie Bedaman, a housewife from Livonia Park; Sheldon Surkin, a dentist from Troy.

That's Mrs. Ross of Bloomfield Hills and Mrs. Grossman of Troy and Nov. 7 and 8. The ninth seat was vacated when lawyer Hazel Burger moved to Washington. Nominations will be accepted from members and a new director will be elected by the board.

Ross, Stenhardt and Mrs. Grossman's husband are old school chums. Other board members are friends, spouses of friends, acquaintances through the years of political battles.

We're involving people who aren't in-



MCL's gimmick to promote its tax proposal recently was a modern Paul Revere's ride by helicopter. Co-director Doug Ross (left) is interviewed by television newsmen Dave Whitman. (Staff photo)

involved in political parties. We purposely went to people who weren't in politics," said Ross.

The board goes over program proposals carefully. The board must give Ross and Mrs. Grossman prior approval to hold news conferences, which are geared primarily to television.

THE ANSWER to how policy gets made is a little longer. For example, "Someone came to us with a good idea on funeral home abuses," Ross recalled. "I looked like something we could get into. I took it to the board. Then we bounced it off key activists."

They activists didn't want to deal with it. They admitted maybe they were getting ripped off after they were dead, but they wanted to work on something that would help them while they are still alive.

If you can't make an issue important to people's everyday lives, nothing will happen. The funeral home project was dropped.

Added Mrs. Grossman: "We have knowledgeable people with a sense of feed-in. When I just started talking about auto repairs, people would nod their heads."

Ross said bouncing an idea off key activists involves a combination of scientific sampling and careful listening for qualitative response. They look for intensity of response and ask people, "Will you work for it?"

KEEPING IT SIMPLE is the key to any MCL proposal. There voters have deflected proposals to permit a graduated income tax in Michigan in 1980 and as recently as 1972.

MCL leaders think their Proposal D, however, will fly. Ross explained:

"We did some polling—we can do it cheaply, with volunteers. People told us two things. First, people don't know what it is. A graduated income tax is. Second, all they were being asked to do in '68 and '72 was take some 'prohibitive' language out of the constitution and trust the legislature."

The answer that came back was: "We don't trust the legislature."

So MCL's new proposal, if passed, will require income tax cuts for single taxpayers earning \$20,000 or less, along with exemptions of \$1,500 per person on the family.

The last revenue would have to be made up by the legislature's raising the rates of higher incomes. It's a simple two-step proposition.

Such simplifying has led the Michigan State Chamber of Commerce to charge Ross with "propagandizing to false stereotypes," playing to "emotions," trying to "turn taxation into a class issue," "inventing devil" and fostering a "them-against-us."

For example, if Proposal C passes, the state will be unable to increase state gasoline and vehicle registration taxes—even though there is a pressing need for more revenues to offset the impact of inflation on state and road maintenance repair programs.

LIT dinner set

College scholarships and financial aid will highlight the Metropolitan Detroit Schoolmen's Club (MDS) annual dinner at 6 p.m. Thursday. The dinner is hosted by Lawrence Institute of Technology at the Plum Hollow Club in Southfield.

Dr. Arthur Jefferson, superintendent of Detroit Public Schools, Dr. Lee Peterson, director of financial aid for the Michigan Department of Education, and Dr. Joel A. Goulding, MDS scholarship chairman, will discuss the variety of scholarship opportunities available to college students, especially those from middle income families.

us' political climate.

MCL HAS a method for calling out select troops for a specific problem.

Suppose a member of a legislative commerce committee is balking at a consumer bill. MCL has a listing of all the zip codes on his district. From the computerized membership mailing list, MCL prints out the names of its activists in that lawmaker's district.

MCL members in the district get either a target mailing or a phone call from Kay Campbell, deputy to the co-directors and field organizer.

Suddenly the legislator finds himself getting 25 or 30 telephone calls from consumers, citizens. Usually—99 times out of 100—it's enough to turn around his vote.

Why? "Lobbyists" (Ross means business lobbyists) have power only in a vacuum. Throw in 25 citizens on the other side of

the issue, and the legislator will say to the lobbyist, "I can't help you. I've got too much here." The lobbyist will accept that."

ROSS GREW UP in northwest Detroit, attended Mumford High and the University of Michigan, where he did undergraduate work in history and graduate work in economics. He also attended the London School of Economics ("not as good as Michigan") and earned a master of public affairs degree from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University.

Schooling was interrupted by jobs of a year or two on the staff of Congressman at large Neil Staeber (D-Mich.) in 1963, legislative aide to Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) in 1965, teaching in Detroit's North-eastern and Northwestern highs in 1967-8, legislative aide to Sen. Joseph Tydings (D-Md.) in 1969-70, assistant to New York's then-Mayor John V. Lindsay for police, fire and sanitation briefly in '72.

At Princeton he wrote a book ("not very good"), called "Robert F. Kennedy: Apostle of Change," published by Simon & Schuster. A large portrait of RFK is the chief decoration of his office in MCL's headquarters in the Southfield Office Plaza, 17000 W. Eight Mile.

Mrs. Grossman was raised in New York City and attended the University of Michigan from 1961-66 to earn an MA in psychology. After her marriage she worked in 1968-69 in institutional research at the University of Detroit.

RETURNING to Michigan after leaving Lindsay, Ross teamed up with Mrs. Grossman to start MCL. He worked out of his apartment in Trenton, living off savings the first year. Mrs. Grossman's husband made their family income at an advertising agency.

The second year, Ross began taking a salary that started at \$8,000 and Mrs. Grossman, as deputy, had a smaller salary.

"Meanwhile, Ross has also been working for Common Cause, most visibly on the 'open meetings' law recently enacted. He

is a registered lobbyist for Common Cause and has that group's telephone on his MCL office desk."

This year, this budget—including the salaries of Ross and Mrs. Grossman as co-directors and Mrs. Campbell as deputy—will run \$60,000 to \$70,000. Office manager Debbie Simon is a volunteer.

ONE-THIRD of the budget comes from individuals who contribute at fund-raisers. The big one is a "beer bash," where tickets are \$5 to \$25. Gifts are not tax exempt because MCL does not have charity status with the IRS.

One-third comes from church groups. In the '74 sales tax campaign, for example, Methodists contributed money, and Catholic organizations gave "in-kind" help.

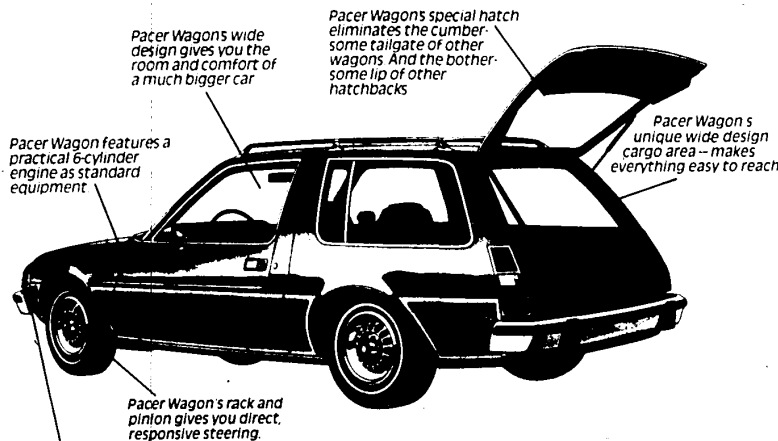
One-third will come from groups backing Proposal D this year. Ross specifically cited the United Auto Workers and the AFL-CIO.

With a string of successes, Ross finds workers enthusiastic to help. But he admits, "The real test will come when we lose one."

Barbara Grossman is now co-director of Michigan Citizens Lobby. (Staff photo)



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MML asks no on 'C'

The Michigan Municipal League has asked voters to reject Proposal C, which will appear on the Nov. 4 ballot.

In a letter to its members, MML President Charles E. Palmer, mayor of Canton, warned that passage of the proposal would result in a drastic shift in Michigan's state-local system of public finance and bring increases in local property taxes.

What Proposal C advocates fail to point out," Palmer said, "is that a great deal of the state's tax revenues are not spent by the state at all, but are returned to local governments to be used for essential services."

The proposal would limit the revenue of the state government to 83 percent of the personal income of the state during any given fiscal year. Spending, and consequently state taxes, could only go above that figure if a state of emergency were approved by two-thirds of the state legislature and with the governor's consent.

The MML has joined with Michigan Taxpayers Voting "No" on Proposal C, a statewide organization formed by the League of Women Voters to coordinate opposition to the proposal, to express its members' opposition to the constitutional amendment.

By limiting the state's ability to raise additional revenues to help local uses

meet rising costs of public services, Proposal C will shift this problem to local units—which will be forced to compete for local property tax increases," Palmer said.

For example, if Proposal C passes, the state will be unable to increase state gasoline and vehicle registration taxes—even though there is a pressing need for more revenues to offset the impact of inflation on state and road maintenance repair programs.

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