

How Citizens Lobby gets string of new laws

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

By TIM RICHARD

The first time Doug Ross and Barbara Grossman came 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 sniffed, and refused to register them.

LATER THEY got themselves registered by mail. Since that day in January 1973, the team of Ross and Grossman, chairman of (fictitious) 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 to the lame duck legislation to raise 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-set" laws for state agencies.

For the second straight election, MCL has a petition on the Nov. 7 ballot.

Proposal D to cut income taxes 45 per cent of the population and raise them for 15 per cent through a graduated income tax.

ALREADY THEIR design, the only names are over their MCL televised news existence are Doug Ross and Barbara Grossman.

We're 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 count membership dues. A member is someone who says, 'I want to be involved with your group. They get materials and participate about two meetings a year for the whole membership."

It's clearly a loose kind of membership. It fluctuates from issue to issue. I suppose we have a hard core of 5,000 to 10,000."

During Proposal D on the ballot, required 250,000 petition signatures. That puts the number of circulation at 10,000 to 15,000.

That's a great check on a group like ourselves—the willingness of 10,000 or 12,000 or 15,000 people to work. I can't get 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 slush fund.

The short answer is that MCL is run by a handful of people and a lot of volunteers, not even that many of us. For an organization with such immense political clout, MCL's board consists of political unknowns.

Chairman Fred Steinhardt, a Detroit lawyer; Michael Fiser, a former state legislator; and Daniel Lester, a company employee from Taylor. Harry Lester, a steelfounder from Livonia; Julie Bederman, a housewife from Livonia Park; Sheldon Sorkin, dentist from Troy.

That's six. Ross of Bloomfield Hills, and Mrs. Grossman of Southfield.

The ninth seat was vacated when lawyer Daniel Lester moved to Washington. Nominations will be accepted from members and a new director will be elected by the board.

Mr. Steinhardt 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

MML asks no on 'C'

The Michigan Municipal League has asked voters to reject Proposal C, which would impose a state tax on public services.

In letter to its members, MML President Charles E. Palmer, mayor of Clawson, 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 is to point out, Palmer said, "that is a great deal of 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 8.3 per cent of the personal income of the state during any given fiscal year. Spending and consequently state taxes would only go above that figure if the state legislature voted to do so 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 state-wide 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 units



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 them and Grossman must give approval to hold news conferences, which are geared primarily to television.

THE ANSWER to how policy gets made is a simple one. For example:

"Someone comes to us with a good case on funeral home abuses," Ross recalled. "It 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 directly. For example, 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 repair, people would nod their heads. Now we're talking about off-the-wall issues, involve a combination of scientific sampling and careful listening for qualitative responses. They look for intensity of response and ask people, 'Will you work for it?'

KEEPING IT SIMPLE is the key to any MCL proposal. Twice voters call for detailed proposals to permit a graduated income tax in Michigan—in 1968 and as recently as 1972.

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

"We did some polling—we can do it cheaply, with volunteers. People told us two things. First, people didn't know what it (a graduated income tax) was. 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 proposal, if passed, will require income tax rates for single tax payers earning \$20,000 or less, along with exemptions of \$1,500 per person in the family.

The last step is to get the legislature to make up by accepting the raising of the rates of other incomes. It's a simple two-step process.

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the issue, and the legislator will say to the lobbyist, 'I can't help you; I've got too much heat.' 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 earned 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. While working was interrupted by a year in the Army, he was on the staff of Congressman at-large, Neel Staebler (D) in 1963, legislative aide to Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) in 1965, teaching in the Northeast and Northwestern highs in 1967-8, legislative aide to Sen. Joseph R. Biden (D) in 1968, and legislative aide to New York City 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 portrait of him hangs in the chief decoration of his office in MCL's headquarters in the Southfield Office Plaza, 1700 W. Eight Mile.

Mrs. Grossman was raised in New York City and attended the University of Michigan. She earned an MA in psychology. After her marriage she worked in 1966-69 in institutional research at the University of Detroit.

RETURNING TO Michigan after leaving law school, Ross got 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 by

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

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 "beverage bank," where tickets are \$3 to \$25. (Gifts are not tax exempt because the group does not have charity status with the IRS.)

One-third comes from church groups. In the '74 sales tax campaign, for example, Methodist contributed money, and Catholic organizations gave "unkind" help. One-third will come from groups like 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)

MCL HAS a method for calling out targets for a specific problem. It's called "Support." Each legislative committee is balanced at a consumer level. MCL has a listing of all the zip codes in the district get either a target mailing or a phone call from Kay Campbell, deputy to the co-directors and field organizer.

Such a target regulator finds himself getting 25 or 30 telephone calls from constituents. 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 in the other side of

the equation and you've got a much bigger car."

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