

Reagan's budget plan sparks cash debate

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A major debate is brewing between state administrators and local government officials over how to parcel out federal "block grant" money.

Some state officials say their offices should set spending priorities. They argue that, legally, local governments are creatures of the state.

Local officials call that "paternalistic." They want "joint determination."

"The federal government should insist the states sit down with local officials to determine how the funds will be used," said John Amberger, deputy director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. SEMCOG is a voluntary association of local units in seven counties which engages in regional planning.

analysis

PRESIDENT Reagan's new federalism program calls for taking 57 "categorical grant" programs, where money goes to local governments and schools which apply for them, and consolidating them into nine new "blocks."

Total funds would be reduced by about 25 percent. The money would go to the states to administer. Local officials say frankly they are worried not only about the cuts but that Lansing might decide to parcel out the funds differently — if at all.

Michael Giusac, SEMCOG's outgoing executive director, wants the federal government to mandate that block grant money be passed

through the state to local units.

"Here is a program where Congress wrote a law and the communities applied for funds," he said. "Now the issue becomes one of writing regulations for 'pass-through.'"

Adds Amberger: "Now the state wants to snatch it from us."

Giusac said local units have the informal beginnings of a process to develop their positions. It is an eight-member Michigan Council on Intergovernmental Relations.

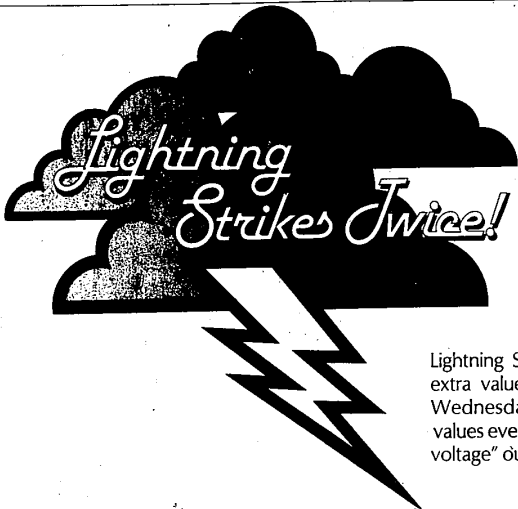
Said Giusac: "MCIR is not the answer, but it is a forum." Many states are organizing state advisory councils, he said.

AMBERGER ADDS, "If there is no process, the states will unilaterally make the decisions." The key, he said, is "joint determination."

"State officials use the vague words 'We shall consult.' Well, 'consult' can mean anything, including the paternalistic announcement, 'Here's what we are going to do,' he said.

Giusac said, "The state will tell you that local governments are creatures of the state. That was once true, but it's outmoded now." Giusac credits Lt. Gov. James Brickley as head of the governor's Community Development Cabinet for being sensitive to local problems. But he argues that the cabinet is not adequately staffed to be a state office of local government.

Two governors, George Romney and William Milliken, have proposed a state office of local affairs. Always the proposal has died in the Legislature.



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