

Part-time Legislature

Can it cut government cost, limit its power?

First in a series

By Margaret Neubacher
staff writer

In the midst an unprecedented recall mood that ousted two state senators and put a third in limbo, a new effort to control government is taking shape. A group of Michigan legislators and residents, looking to cut the cost of government and limit its power, proposes amending the state Constitution to limit the Legislature to part-time work.

KNOWN AS the Michigan Part-Time Legislature (PTL) petition drive, it has gathered 35,000 of the 304,000 signatures needed to put a constitutional amendment before voters Nov. 8.

Headquartered at PO Box 20205 in Lansing, 48901, it faces a July deadline for gathering petition signatures.

The PTL drive was started in August by two Republican state representatives, Tom Powers of Traverse City and Vic Krause of Rockford.

MICHIGAN IS one of six states whose legisla-

tures meet most of the year. The other 44 states limit their legislatures' sessions.

Neighboring industrial states of Ohio and Illinois have full-time legislatures. Wisconsin, Minnesota and Indiana meet on a part-time basis.

Main elements of the proposal:

- Legislative sessions running from mid-January through the first week of May. If needed, no more than 15 special session days could be called by the governor or leaders of the two houses.

- Pay would be halved to \$15,000 annually (from \$31,000 in '83), plus some minor benefits but no state-paid retirement. In addition, legislators would be paid \$50 for expenses per session (compared with a \$5,200 annual allowance in '83). Any increase in salary or expense money would require a two-thirds roll call vote of both houses.

- Employers must grant a legislator unpaid leave of absence to attend sessions.

Powers believes legislators needn't meet full time.

"I don't believe that our problems are all that complex. We spend a lot of time on relatively irrelevant matters."

"Since convening in the fall, we did two things —

passed Gov. Blanchard's strategic fund proposal and the DSS (Department of Social Services) budget."

"Until we set the budget in April, there is virtually nothing to do in January, February and March."

OPPOSED TO the idea is former House Speaker William Ryan, D-Detroit. Now House clerk, Ryan arrived in Lansing in 1958 and was instrumental in the transition from a part-time to a full-time Legislature in the late 1960s.

"I don't know why anyone would want to go back to those irrational days," Ryan said from his office in Lansing.

"We came in January and within two weeks were faced with deadlines for bills to get drafted, printed, in and out of committees and passed in both houses. We argued about which bill would be at the top of the list for hearing and would cram and crowd our deadlines."

"PTL is a reflection of a general attitude that government should be cut down to size," Ryan said. "But why do people push for PTL without even bothering to comment on a part-time executive or judicial branch? In a PTL, how can we maintain a separation of powers if the executive branch functions for the Legislature most of year?"

"In the part-time Legislature, there really was no staff for the Legislature, but there was for the governor. At the end of the session, Capitol Building employees were sent home," Ryan said.

Powers believes the Capitol would be open and active during the off-season. "Our proposal does not require an increase or decrease in the number of staff a legislator has. That would be up to him. We would hope that they would be able to cut back."

"I don't recommend the PTL as a cost savings. The savings of \$3.8 million we anticipate is a drop in the bucket when compared to the state's \$5 billion budget."

"Most importantly I feel it will allow more and better people to serve in the Legislature," Powers said.

Next issue: Who would be elected if Michigan had a part-time Legislature?

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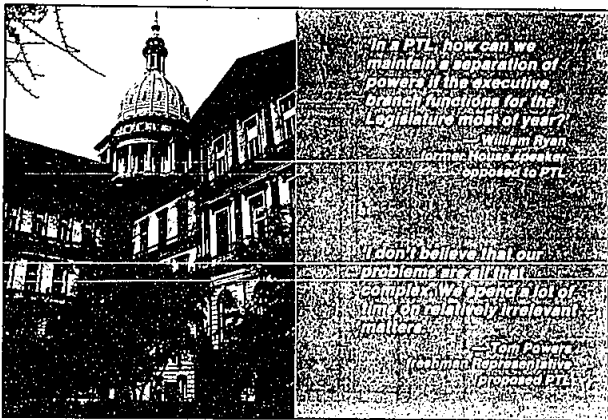
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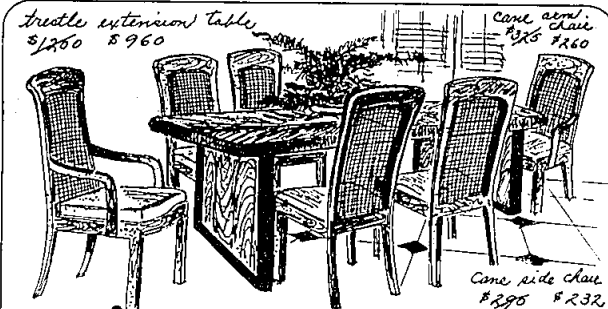


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William Ryan
former House Speaker
opposed to PTL

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Tom Powers
Michigan Representative
proposed PTL



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