

Influencing a part-time Legislature

Third in a series
By Margaret Neubacher
staff writer

Larry Fry use to teach school in Hazel Park. For years he took his students to Lansing to observe the Michigan Legislature.

"Every time I went, I got tired off by what I saw. People weren't listening. Some even watched TV," Fry recalled.

The avowed Democrat, who is now retired, is doing something with that anger.

"I found Powers and Krause, went to a meeting they had on a part-time legislature and got involved," said Fry, now metro coordinator for the Part-Time Legislature (PTL) petition drive.

STATE REPS. Thomas Powers, R-Traverse City, and Victor Krause, R-Rockford, hammered out a ballot proposal for a PTL last year and are carrying on a petition drive to get the issue before Michigan voters Nov. 6.

Last weekend, delegates to the Republican State Convention in Grand Rapids gave 1,188 to 477 support to their PTL proposal.

Today 44 states have part-time legislatures. Michigan is one of only six states whose legislature meets year round.

Why? Michigan did have a PTL until 1969. Reasons for the change were in part political but mainly to get the job done, according to those who guided the transition. Yet the fact that the majority of other states operate with PTLs leaves no doubt that Michigan could, too.

What's not known is how a PTL would go about getting the job done.

Some say it could be done with more efficiency and better people.

Others contend that the governor would have more power, and special interest groups and lobbyists would control the legislative process.

Lt. Gov. Martha Griffiths asks, "Who can afford to take a part-time job today? I'm concerned as to where a part-time legislator's allegiance would be. I'm afraid it'd be to the person who really pays their salary."

Griffiths presides over the state Senate and served in the state House of Representatives 1949-52. It was part time.

But Powers, a lawyer with his own practice, feels a PTL would only encourage legislators to be more independent.

"Because they'd be making a living elsewhere, legislators wouldn't be dependent on special interest groups or anyone else for their living."

State Rep. Joe Forbes, D-Oak Park, majority floor leader, is totally against PTL.

"It would take the legislature and turn it back to the lobbyists. A PTL would allow only people who could afford it to take office, or they'd be people recruited by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce to run," Forbes said.

SPECIAL INTEREST groups and lobbyists are believed to wield a fair amount of power in the legislature now. PTL opponents contend those groups would become even more powerful in a PTL.

They say legislators wouldn't have time to do research and study all the issues themselves and might become dependent on the work of special interest groups.

"Many PTLs meet for 30-90 days each year. Part-time legislators often have small staffs, no office and little individual information on what they vote on," said Roger Marz, professor of political science at Oakland University and close watcher of politics.

"What you see in this case is an enormous increase in the effectiveness of special interest groups. Groups such as the MEA (Michigan Education Association, a teachers union), for example, might actually draft and print a bill for a PTL to pass."

PTLs don't get high ratings in most political science circles.

OAKLAND COMMUNITY College political science instructor Gerald Faye asks, "Do you want Michigan's \$5-billion budget allocated by people who make their living elsewhere? Should a PTL make those \$5-billion decisions in a few months?"

Marz said the long hours legislators put in on committees and in hearings are not necessarily wasted.

"There's no way a PTL could have conceived of Michigan's revised criminal sexual conduct code, which is used as a model around the country. Legislators put in months of committee work to write that code."

State Rep. Maxine Berman, D-Southfield, acknowledging that her comments may be construed as self-serving, says 90 percent of a legislator's time is spent in committee work.

"We spent 12 weeks in committee working on the recent personal income tax increase. I was at every one of those meetings. Let me tell you, it could easily have been a permanent increase if we hadn't had a chance to hear from all sides and thoroughly discuss the issue," Berman said.

OTHERS, ESPECIALLY Republicans, disagree that committee meetings are valuable and efficient.

"We work best of all under deadline pressure," said state Sen. Doug Cruce, R-Troy. "A PTL is not a cost savings, but it is more efficient. The longer we're in session, the longer we have to rationalize what we do."

Schoolcraft College Trustee Harry Greenleaf, a longtime Republican Party leader who favors PTL, said, "What we're really talking about in a PTL is how much time is spent in formal session. Legislators would have to come in and go right to task. It would place more emphasis on the executive branch to propose and research the issues."

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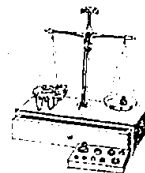
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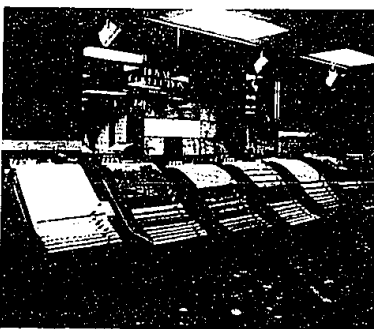
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