

Senate stonewalls effort to air JOA

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The Michigan Senate stonewalled two efforts to question a proposed joint operating agreement (JOA) by Detroit's two daily newspapers.

"Politics. That's my guess," said Sen. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, in an interview after Wednesday's vote. "They don't want to do it (face the issue) before the primary (Aug. 5)," said Fessler, who opposed both resolutions. "Myself, I don't care one way or the other."

SEN. BASIL Brown, D-Highland Park, was the only lawmaker to argue on the floor against the legislature's attempt to dig further into the merger. "Are these public utilities? Do we have a right to in-

terfere? Is it un-American for them to want to make a profit?"

"God help me for defending these people," said Brown, whose history of drunk driving and drug arrests has been well displayed by Detroit papers, "but they have rights, too."

The senate rejected back-to-back efforts to take up:

- a resolution by Sen. John Kelly, D-Detroit, to ask U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese to hold public hearings on the JOA proposal. The vote was 18-18.
- a resolution by Sen. Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, to ask the attorney general to pose a series of tough questions in reviewing the JOA application. The vote was 19-16, one short of a majority.

AREA SENATORS voted the

same on both resolutions:

Yes — Doug Cruce, R-Troy; Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills; Rudy Nichols, R-Waterford; Patrick McCollough, D-Deerborn.

No — Fessler and R. Robert Geake, R-Northville.

Absent — William Faust, D-Westland.

Geake said he followed the lead of senate Republican floor leader Phil Arthurs of Whitefish. Without explanation, the GOP leader moved to send Cropsey's resolution to committee.

BUT CRITICS of the JOA were vocal.

Faxon blistered the papers for charging just 15 and 20 cents per copy when the prevailing price of papers owned by Gannett (parent of the Detroit News) is 35 cents in out-

state Michigan.

Critics noted that a 5-cent price increase six days a week would yield the 600,000-circulation Detroit Free Press more than \$9 million a year and return it to profitability. The Detroit Free Press, labeled a "failing newspaper" under federal JOA application rules, reported a series of \$7-million-a-year losses.

"There's no 'failing' business operation here," said Kelly in a lengthy floor speech.

"What is their ultimate objective? Quality reporter services? Or one motivated by a potential to put the squeeze on advertising customers? Or to squeeze suburban papers?"

CROPSEY, who chaired a judiciary committee hearing in Detroit last week, asked:

"Can the Detroit Free Press be

considered a failing newspaper in the face of its recent additions to staff on the national and international levels, its recent investment of \$22 million in a new plant, its 31-percent increase in advertising revenues over the past three years, its failure to raise advertising rates and its decision to lower its (outstate) price, and its continued circulation increase since 1977?

"If the Free Press is, as claimed, a failing enterprise, why does the

News seek, through the JOA, to split all profits on an even basis after the first five years?"

Sen. Joe Mack, D-Ironwood, said state government has a stake in the

JOA because the legislature voted \$51 million in aid to the city of Detroit, which granted the Detroit Free Press a 50-percent, 12-year property tax abatement for its \$22 million riverfront printing plant.

UNDER THE Clayton Antitrust Act, a JOA could be considered a monopoly. But a 1970 amendment aimed at preserving newspapers allows JOAs after a series of federal procedures.

The Detroit News and Detroit Free Press propose a 100-year agreement to set up a new company called the Detroit Newspaper Agency.

SEMTA expands Oakland service

The Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority, SEMTA, will provide new bus service to employment centers in Oakland County beginning today, General Manager Albert Martin said.

The service improvements will primarily benefit employees at the Blue Cross/Blue Shield complex in Southfield and at the Oak/Tec — Comerica complex in Auburn Hills.

"These service improvements are being provided without additional costs to SEMTA's overall budget," Martin said.

BLUE CROSS/Blue Shield has occupied several buildings at 11 Mile and Inkster roads in Southfield. Approximately 850 employees are there now, and another 1,200 are expected to join them in July.

Several existing SEMTA routes have been reconfigured to provide regular bus service to this employment center.

At the Oak/Tec — Comerica complex, bus service has been provided by the privately operated Tower Bus Co. under a contract with Comerica Bank. The contract is being can-

celed, and SEMTA will extend the Arrow route to provide direct shuttle service to the complex from downtown Pontiac.

The new routing will serve employees of Electronic Data Systems and other companies, as well as Comerica. More than 2,000 people are employed at the Oak/Tec com-

plex, which is at Squirrel and Hamlin roads in Auburn Hills.

"The new service is the result of an exhaustive examination of our system to find possible minor changes which would add up to significant service improvements without adding new buses or incurring other major expenses," Martin said.

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