

# The 6-County Agency Is No Government, But It's Important As An Information Broker

## SEMCOG's 'New Power'

By TIM RICHARD

Bob Turner is like the husband who was told: "You're too easy-going with your wife. Why don't you stop beating her?"

Turner, as executive director of the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments, gets the same kind of contradictory, double-barreled questions on the job and at social gatherings.

First, the questioner voices fears that SEMCOG is some kind of "metro" government or super-government, out to grab powers from local governments — hence, too powerful.

Second, the same questioner will ask: "Why don't you DO something?"

Or, as a newsman who collared him at a municipal officials convention put it: "You're the camel's head under the tent. Right now ya can't do nothin', ya ain't doin' nothin'... you ought to consolidate all those local governments."

"Whoa," replies Turner, an easy-going type who likes to slip into the blue-collar vernacular. "That ain't what we're gonna do."

TO FIGURE OUT where Turner, who has been SEMCOG's top hired man for 2 1/2 years, wants to go, you have to know where he's been, and he's been in a city manager across the country most of his professional life. He believes in local government.

Then, you have to know that SEMCOG is not a government itself, even though that word appears in its title. It's a voluntary federation of local governments. As Turner and his elected superiors run it, it's a service agency in the six-county area open to the more than 400 cities, villages, townships, school districts, intermediate districts, community college districts and the counties themselves.

"I consider us dedicated to the principle of strengthening local governments as they exist," says Turner, and this may help to

explain why SEMCOG gets so many accusations of do-nothingness. Its work is with other units of government, not the public. It collects no direct taxes, floats no bond issues, runs no schools, arrests no burglars. Joe Average rarely sees it.

And while he works for an agency that covers six counties, Turner is less than charmed by the idea of a super-government.

"Anyone needs only to look at New York or Los Angeles to know there is no economy of scale, there is no magic in bigness."

Even if a super-government were more efficient, Turner probably wouldn't buy the idea: "People want responsive government. That means, quite frequently, inefficiency. The trick is to get a balance of efficiency and responsiveness."

SO MUCH FOR THEORY. What, then, does SEMCOG actually do?

Turner boils its 70 different projects into three functional headings: (1) Coordinating local units on a cooperative basis to attack problems they can't handle individually — e.g., solid waste disposal, law enforcement improvements; (2) aiding local units in their dealings with Lansing and Washington and (3) acting as "a unique mechanism whereby the private sector can pour its resources into solving urban problems."

Turner is proud, for example, of the work his staff did in helping Ann Arbor collar a \$600,000 federal community renewal grant and notes that Pontiac officials joined because they were convinced SEMCOG could help them get federal funds.

SEMCOG reviews applications for federal grants not for the purpose of imposing super-government's will on the local units, but in order to give them help. "If you perceive, like Troy, that you can handle everything that comes your way, I guess I can't really sell this to you," says Turner in a reference to the big suburb which quit SEMCOG last year.

While SEMCOG's interests are many—

mid-career programs for local officials, inventory of drug programs, development of minority group job opportunities in government, regional planning and so on — the one issue that most excites Bob Turner is information systems. He spent most of a three-hour interview on this topic.

"LOCAL GOVERNMENT is still in the dark ages on data and computer use — information systems techniques. I'm not just talking about handling payrolls and water bills, but the way business and the state and federal governments do it.

"Land use parcel files. Business Licenses. Planning — plotting trends and concentrations of populations.

"The day the chief of police and the school system learn to use them, you'll have some intelligent use of land parcel files. A problem that was considered zoning could turn out to be a social welfare problem; a police problem could turn out to be a recreation problem."

An interesting point, that of cities and schools using the same data. One of the ultra-conservative arguments against SEMCOG, when the enabling bill was still in the Legislature, was that cities and school districts needn't be in the same association together. And here's the SEMCOG director saying they'll be enlightened until they learn to make joint use of land parcel data.

In Washtenaw County, cities and the intermediate school district are "getting together" in the computer area. In an 18-community "down-river" area that extends to Westland, SEMCOG, Metropolitan Funds and Burroughs are working on a computer use pool idea.

GETTING LOCAL governments to use data systems is only one side of SEMCOG's information efforts. The other side, says Turner, is that SEMCOG itself is becoming "an information broker."

TALUS — the four-year Transportation



E. ROBERT TURNER is executive director (chief hired operating officer) of the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments.

and Land Use Study — is largely responsible. "Whatever else is said about TALUS, it provided a wealth of demographic information, a wealth of information on tape from the late '40s and early '50s on traffic, land use, patterns of in-migration, patterns of out-migration, the movements of blacks..."

Combine TALUS's information with the fact that SEMCOG was picked by the U.S. Census Bureau as a "summary tape processing center," and it prompts Turner to say: "I submit that I can provide information service in multiples of whatever a member pays in dues. If they did it alone, it would cost them more for one project than their membership fee."

With the census data, SEMCOG can test its TALUS models; monitor the effectiveness of housing, health and model safety programs; evaluate alternative public safety programs; and use it to review requests for federal grants.

"MAYBE THAT DOESN'T grab anybody — but that's power," says Turner. He talks in terms of what Detroit News Publisher Peter B. Clark calls the "new power" — the power of information and knowledge — rather than the "old power," like who has what votes on the executive committee.

Indeed, one of SEMCOG's public relations problems, Turner thinks, is that police officials, for example, are aware of SEMCOG's work on law enforcement planning councils, but the mayors (old power) aren't.

He ends many of his dissertations on SEMCOG's action programs with an almost fatalistic observation: "... It's not anything that anyone's going to give us a plaque for."

## Cavanagh's Woodward Subway Plan Won't Work--OU Students

An Oakland University engineering study has splashed cold water on former Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh's proposal for a 4 1/2-mile subway along the Woodward Ave. corridor.

An engineering systems class, after a 10-week study, said the Cavanagh plan wouldn't pay and wouldn't do much to stimulate new development or reduce congestion on Woodward.

Cavanagh launched his surprise idea only a few days before leaving office, and it was generally badly received for that reason.

Another reason for its lack of popularity was that it failed to mesh with plans done by SEMTA (Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority) and TALUS (six-county Transportation and Land Use Study).

THE OU students who made what the university describes as "the only formal investigation yet made of the proposal" (were Warren Turski of Pontiac, Robert White of Rochester, Jagdishchandra Patel of Sterling Heights and Ronald McPherson of Pontiac).

Their study will be published in the January issue of the student journal of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers.

three-volume report on the urban Detroit area.

The students investigated Woodward Ave. for the effect the proposed subway would have on stimulating new development and on reducing congestion.

They found little land available for development; that most of the trips along the corridor did not originate or terminate along the proposed length of the subway system; and that there would be little incentive for a driver to park a car and travel by subway between the New Center area and central business district.

Parking costs were about equal at either end of the proposed route, and there was little difference in travel time between auto and the proposed subway.

According to the TALUS data, there were approximately 50,000 trips a day with origins and destinations along the Woodward corridor.

At a proposed fare of 25 cents each, traffic revenue alone would fall short of supporting a subway whose initial costs were set at approximately \$102 million in the Cavanagh proposal, the students said. The system could not pay for itself and a substantial annual subsidy would be required, they concluded.

Using both TALUS and Docket data, the young engineers established the following indices of performance: that a transportation system is needed where traffic is heaviest; that a transportation system will have the greatest effect on the corridor with the highest number of residents and workers; that the greatest capacity for development will certainly be found along the Woodward corridor with the greatest amount of vacant land.

The following conclusions were reached:

Construction of a transportation system along the Woodward corridor would have the greatest effect on reducing congestion; construction along Grand River would provide transportation for the greatest number of people; construction along Grand Boulevard would

do the most to speed new development.

To satisfy a weighted combination of these goals, the new transportation system should be constructed along the Grand Boulevard corridor, the report concluded.

THE OAKLAND engineering

students were participants in a large scale systems engineering class.

They generalized former Mayor Cavanagh's proposal, starting broadly and focusing down to the specific Cavanagh recommendation.

They began from the following broad base: What are the

transportation needs of the six-county metropolitan area? What are the transportation needs for the City of Detroit?

What are the transportation needs of the best traffic corridor in Detroit? What would be the best transportation system to install along the best corridor?

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## Wayne County Critical Huron River Pollution Opposed

Wayne County's Board of Commissioners is opposing expansion of sewage treatment plants at Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti on grounds that the plants are polluting the Huron River.

The two cities in Washtenaw County have been asked to expand their sewage treatment plants at Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti on grounds that the plants are polluting the Huron River.

The county commissioners, last week, adopted a resolution opposing continued discharge of treated waste water into the Huron River and arguing that the grant applications be denied.

THE RESOLUTION charges that "the continued discharge into the Huron River of effluent from these plants is not conducive to the safe use and enjoyment by the public of the waters of the Huron River."

Instead, the resolution urges that Ann Arbor Ypsilanti join the proposed Huron Valley sewerage system, under which interceptor sewers would be constructed to carry sewage to a treatment plant at the mouth of the Huron River in Brownstown Township.

Opposition to the proposed

Ann Arbor Ypsilanti expansion was recommended by the public works committee of the Board of Commissioners following meetings with representatives of various agencies.

The agencies included the Huron River Watershed Council, the Michigan and Wayne County health departments, the County Road

Commission, drain commissioner and County Department of Public Works.

A state health department spokesman told the committee the river will never be safe for swimming as long as the discharge continues.

A 1967 study by the U.S. Public Health Service recommended that the two cities abandon their present

treatment plants and join in the proposed system.

COUNTY WATER Supply Engineer George R. Bingham said there is always a danger of raw sewage flowing into the Huron River as happened two years ago when heavy rains flooded out the Ann Arbor treatment plant.

"The treated sewage has to go somewhere," Bingham said. "The main point is that the Detroit River and Lake Erie have infinitely more ability to absorb the treated water."

In other actions, the Board of Commissioners:

\* Approved an application for a \$138,314 federal grant to finance 60 per cent of next year's budget for the sheriff's Metro Squad, the undercover unit that has seized some \$2 million worth of illegal narcotics since being established last May.

\* Delayed until the Oct. 1 board meeting action on the five nominees to the board of the Wayne County Stadium Authority. A motion for immediate consideration failed by one vote after Commissioner Paul Silver, of Detroit, objected that there was no labor representative among the five.

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NATIONAL FIRE PREVENTION WEEK

October 5-10

Livonia Fire Department will have literature available on Home Fire Safety. They will mention some of the flammable items that the average homeowner feels is quite safe.

They will also show the different types of fire extinguishers, and how best to use them.

They will also show some of the common home-type fire hazards to avoid.

Monday, Wednesday & Friday 1-4 p.m.

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10 week course now in progress Wednesdays in the Livonia Mall Community room, 7 p.m. Still time to register. Call GR 6-1160 or register at the Community room Wednesday 7 p.m.

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