

Blanchard: Cap home taxes only

By Tim Richard
staff writer

The link wasn't dry on Gov. James Blanchard's State of the State message when sharp debate broke out over his proposal to cap homeowners' school property assessments.

"Any parcel" — not just single-family houses — should be protected, said Sen. Doug Cruce, R-Troy, Cruce on Wednesday introduced a resolution to amend the Michigan Constitution to cap state equalized valuation increases at the rate of consumer price inflation.

"It would cost more money" to include commercial, industrial, agricultural and mining property, objected state treasurer Robert Bowman. Democrat Blanchard's economic guru told reporters the administration's proposal started with homeowners, who are feeling the tightest pinch and who have had pay increases to match inflation in property values.

Livingston, Oakland, Macomb and western Wayne counties have seen double-digit SEV increases on houses, leaders of both parties say.

BOWMAN HELD out hope that Blanchard would agree to cap business assessments, too, if there were "broad-based" cuts in business taxes. He didn't elaborate, but in the past he has called for taxes on banks, thrifts, insurers and computer software.

The treasurer said that if Blanchard's SEV cap had been in place for homeowners for the past four years, it would have cost the treasury \$150 million.

Blanchard said it hasn't been decided whether to 1) reimburse homeowners for excess taxes due to inflated assessments or 2) reduce local tax bills and reimburse school districts for the lost revenue.

Counties, cities, townships, villages and park agencies receiving property taxes apparently wouldn't be reimbursed for their revenue losses.

The 1978 Headlee tax limitation amendment has failed to protect the homeowner, Cruce and Bowman agreed. House Headlee applies to

the total SEV of a city or township, not to individual classes of property. Suburban housing has soared in value since the 1978 economic recovery, but farm property has actually fallen in value.

BLANCHARD WILL continue to tie the state school funding to quality and cost-containment efforts, according to his eighth message as governor. Items:

- A college would get none of the new \$500 million in bond money for construction unless it agreed to contain tuition rates. Blanchard has axed bond money over their double-digit tuition increases during a period of 5 percent consumer price inflation, but this is his first effort to put monetary muscle behind it.

- He will seek another \$5 million in "achievement incentives" for schools that improve test scores, but he wants to add to the list of reasons for giving such grants — improved attendance, reduced dropout rates and criteria set by schools themselves.

- Outstanding community college instructors would be eligible for the same kind of "teaching excellence" awards as university professors.

- Beginning next fall, schools will forfeit part of their state aid unless they offer an "outcome-based core curriculum," to be set in May by the State Board of Education.

Don Bemis, state superintendent of public instruction, put a number on Blanchard's plan to raise the minimum school dropout age to 18 from 16, where it has been since 1944. The State Board of Education supports legislation to lift dropout rates, but Blanchard does not.

Blanchard asked for a new "north metro" State Police post in southern Oakland County, near I-696 and I-75, and a new northern Oakland post near Clarkston. Purpose: to cover all metro freeways in the hunt for drug traffickers.

Director Ritchie Davis said the Pontiac post would be closed, and the Northville post would be moved, although the Northville facility would remain as a district headquarters and crime lab.

Senators doubt dropout plan

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Suburban state senators doubt Gov. James Blanchard's plan to raise the minimum school dropout age to 18 will do any good.

And Republicans are cool to Democrat Blanchard's proposal to cap homeowners' property assessments — but not business.

"We need to have children in school who want to be in school," said Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills. "Attendance is no reward for success."

"Mandatory attendance is more bookkeeping rather than educational achievement."

"AN INTERESTING concept," said Sen. Richard Fessler, R-Commerce, who then raised a long list of questions about how raising the current age 16 dropout law to 18 would work.

"Why are they dropping out of school, period? How are we going to retain them? What enforcement mechanism? It's a motivational issue."

"I DON'T believe it will work," said Sen. Doug Cruce, R-Troy.

"What happens if we tell them 'It's against the law to drop out and they drop out? Do we fine them? Put them in jail?'"

"We force them into a classroom and create disciplinary problems for teachers who already have disciplinary problems. It's not very workable," said Cruce, who said incentives such as vocational training are needed.

Sen. Rudy Nichols, R-Waterford, said the Blanchard proposal is "an

acknowledgment of failure" in public schools. "I'm not sure it's a solution. The solution is the care given in the early years and, beyond that, the care at home."

STATE DEMOCRATIC Party chair F. Thomas Lewand praised Blanchard for "renewing his emphasis on quality in education."

Lewand said raising the dropout age could be "helpful where it's a critical problem. Most people in Oakland County would welcome it. But not in too many communities it is an issue," said the Bloomfield Township lawyer.

Lewand said Blanchard's emphasis on recycling is of great importance in Oakland, where a \$1 billion solid waste program is in the early building stage.

Lewand was alone in praising Blanchard's proposal to cap homeowners' property assessments at the consumer price index (CPI) rate of inflation.

"Homeowners feel the brunt the most. Many are on fixed incomes," said Lewand, citing retirees as one such group.

Republicans blistered the plan for ignoring business assessments. Nichols, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and an announced candidate for circuit judge, saw a constitutional problem with "unequal treatment" for different classes of property.

"We tried to work on the problem (raising assessments) in a bipartisan way, but I ran into this attempt to exclude business."

FESSLER SAID Blanchard was stealing his idea of capping assessments.

Fessler, R-Commerce, said he has been working on the idea as chair of the Senate Transportation Committee. Rail safety, in particular, became an issue after 1989's CSX train wrecks in Highland Township and rural Saginaw County.

Twice in one week Fessler said he found his ideas in others' speeches. Gov. James Blanchard is advocating capping property assessment increases at the rate of consumer inflation (see related story).

Fessler says both sides are borrowing his ideas

Sen. Richard Fessler's safety idea has wound up in his leader's speech. Senate majority leader John Engler, in a Republican state of the state message, borrowed a plan Fessler had been working on.

Said Engler — "We propose the creation of an office of inspector general under the jurisdiction of the State Transportation Commission."

The inspector general's job would be "inspecting rail lines, bridges, airports and other transportation facilities to make them

State drug czar prods MSU to offer alcohol-free rooms

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

Despite a crackdown on campus drinking, Michigan State University officials have yet to follow precedent set by many state colleges and provide housing options for students interested in a school living environment free of alcohol and other substance abuse.

The issue was the topic of a Dec. 13 letter by Michigan's drug czar Donald Reising to MSU president John DiBiaggio.

"I have been working informally with a group very interested in drug-free college dormitory rooms," wrote Reising, director of the state's Office of Drug Agencies.

"I note that according to their analysis, MSU had chosen not to implement a drug-free living environment program. I would urge your consideration of the adoption of such a policy."

An Oakland-County based ad-hoc committee of concerned parents and others have worked for two years with U.S. District Judge Bernard Friedman of West Bloomfield and Rep. David Honigman, R-West Bloomfield, pushing for legislation that requires alcohol and drug-free housing options for students attending Michigan universities and colleges.

Many schools, including the University of Michigan and Oakland University, have voluntarily complied by including options on housing applications. MSU applications do not contain the option. This fall, more than 1,500 students at U-M, OU and Eastern Michigan requested a roommate who does not use alcohol.

"WE ARE NOT ADVERSE to such a program, nor have we ruled it out," said MSU vice president Moses Turner.

"We believe all of our (residence)

halls, not just one, not just one floor, should be drug free. We are trying to find creative ways to deal with the problem, working by and through the students for a free environment, a protective environment, for all.

"We are trying to approach the issue appropriately, assuring we can monitor it and implement it in a way that it has some chance of success, both initially and long term, which means student support," Turner said.

He also said Reising's letter "is not a fair characterization of our position. We have stepped up enforcement of alcohol and other drug violations considerably this year. Our programs are significant. We're not sitting here dillydally and dallying with our hands behind our back. The state can be proud of what we are doing."

In addition to expanded on-campus counseling and treatment for substance abuse and new education-

al programs, Turner said campus police and residency staff have "aggressively" implemented MSU rules regarding the use of alcohol and drugs. All illegal substances are automatically banned from campus, a drinking or possession of liquor is underage students.

Based on a Jan. 8 article in the school's newspaper, *The State News*, the number of arrests made on campus for driving under the influence nearly doubled from October 1988 to October 1989.

REISING INTENDS TO PURSUE the matter.

"Other schools are doing it and I'll keep up the pressure until MSU does," he said, adding it is "frustrating" to think school rules regarding liquor and drugs are not abused "was facetious in my day and is more so today."

Honigman also intends to pursue the matter.

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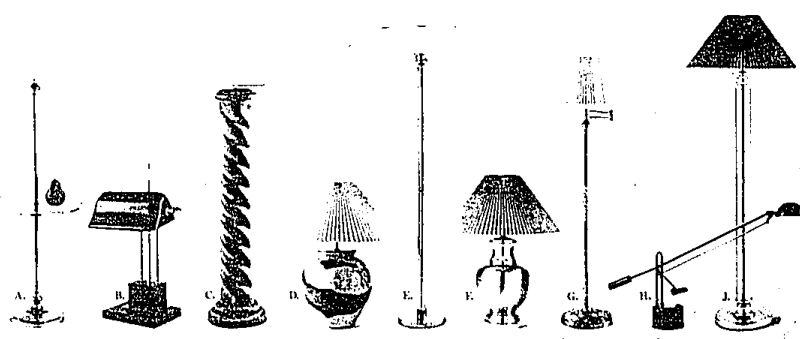
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