

Battle over school aid may be 'all nighter'

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A battle between school districts over state aid may go down to the wire — a long session Friday.

"Speaker Lew Dodak said it might be an all nighter," Rep. William Keith, D-Garden City, said Tuesday. "He hopes for a conference committee report Wednesday or Thursday."

Two versions of the \$700 million school aid bill are in a joint House-Senate conference committee which wasn't scheduled to meet until late Wednesday and may not agree even then.

The House version strips out many categorical aids. The Senate version keeps them.

Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, who like Keith is a member of the conference panel, agreed that

"nothing so far" has happened since the two chambers passed widely different versions of the aid bill.

LAWMAKERS wanted to adjourn for the summer June 14 in order to get the primary campaign trail. But they had to push that date back two weeks because of election-year disagreements over many items. Fourth of July speech engagements await them.

Two versions of the session often is an "all nighter," with literally hundreds of roll calls and last-minute compromises.

Despite being from the Democratic Party, Faxon and Keith are poles apart on the aid bill — aid to all districts, rich or poor, for such specialized budget items as pensions, talented and gifted programs, transportation, pregnant teens, special ed-

ucation — 29 programs altogether.

"The House came out with an extreme position," said Faxon. "The House wanted to wipe 'em all away."

KEITH would like to get rid of all categorical and add the money to the school aid fund, leaving districts the option of how to spend it.

He says his method would raise the number of districts receiving state aid from 70 percent to nearly 90 percent.

"I don't think we'll ever do away entirely with the categorical," Keith said, "but it's gotten out of hand."

"Since I've been up here (18 years), we've gone from eight underfunded categorical to 29 underfunded categorical. A buzzword starts, and we put \$5 million into a categorical for it when you need \$30 million to do the job."

He hinted at a compromise between the chairs of the two appropriations subcommittees on education — Sen. Dan DeGrow, R-Port Huron, and Rep. James O'Neill, D-Saginaw.

"School districts," Keith went on, "are the only local units of government for which the state pays social security and pension costs. We don't do it for townships. We don't do it for

city police departments. We don't do it for road commissions.

"The irony is that no one acknowledges the state does it."

Keith said it makes no sense to send millions in pension aid to the Bloomfield Hills-type districts, which can spend \$7,000 to \$8,000 per student, when the money can be better used in Inkster.

FAXON'S SENATE district includes such out-of-formula school systems as Southfield, Farmington and Novi.

They and other districts in the high-tech belt would get little or no

state aid even if all the categorical were eliminated and all the money put into general aid.

Keith said he may never realize his goal of eliminating all categorical, but argued that's the direction in which to move.

"I got a blistering letter from a woman in Tecumseh," Keith said, "on the gifted and talented program. She said Tecumseh would \$75,000 for the gifted and talented program."

"But under my proposal, Tecumseh would have got \$750,000 more in (general) state aid."

Tax cut petition could be close

By Jeff Holyfield
AP Newsfeatures

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Organizers of two property tax cut petition drives said Monday the fate of their efforts is now in the hands of the people.

"You've got to be an optimist in this business, but it's going to be close. If people turn in their petitions, we'll be on the ballot. If they don't, we won't," said Patrick Anderson, an assistant vice president with Alexander Hamilton Life Insurance Co.

Anderson and former Oakland County Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson are pushing a tax cut plan they wrote together. They have collected 125,000 signatures and have a goal of 300,000.

Meanwhile, the campaign director of a competing plan, Bill McMaster, said that group was close to the number of signatures it needed, but still didn't have enough to provide a cushion.

The extra signatures are necessary to be sure of success if some signatures are found to be invalid by the Secretary of State's office.

That effort, spearheaded by Richard Headlee, sent out a direct mail plea to 800,000 southeast Michigan households earlier this month.

About 2 percent, or roughly 16,000, of those petitions were returned, but 60 percent of them, or 9,600, were invalid because the circulator didn't sign them, McMaster said.

A sentence reminding people to do that was cut from the instructions, to make way for a reminder to send in petitions as quickly as possible, he said.

"It came back and bit us. If we hadn't cut out that one lousy sentence we would have made it by last Thursday," he said.

Last Thursday was the deadline set by the Secretary of State's office for the group to turn in its petitions, but the group hopes to get it extended until July 6, McMaster said.

The Headlee group will decide Tuesday whether to send out a new mailing to a million homes or whether to try to get those who circulated the first batch to sign them, he said.

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