

What 'Power' Is At Stake In SEMCOG Money Debate?

By TIM RICHARD

There's an argument going on in the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, and a few persons say it's a "power struggle."

On one side is Mel Ravitz, the scholarly Detroit councilman who is SEMCOG's chairman, backed by Detroit's Mayor Roman Gribbs. The other is led by three county officials: Former SEMCOG Chairman W.L. (Larry) Mainland, an Oakland County commissioner from Milford; and up-and-coming Robert FitzPatrick, Wayne County Board chairman, a Detroit resident whose industrial medical clinic is in Livonia; and William E. Richards, Oakland County Board chairman.

THE TWO SIDES disagree on how to solve SEMCOG's crisis — a crisis caused by a shortage of memberships (104 out of a possible 345 governments belong) which leads to a shortage of dues, layoffs and loss of good staff members. Ravitz selected a task force to work on reorganization of the six-county voluntary agency and a revision of the dues structure. The task force held a half-dozen meetings and recommended that (a) contributions from cities, villages, towns and school districts be kept at nearly the same \$110,000 level but that (b) counties' dues be kicked up from \$165,000 to \$250,000.

BUT AT A SEMCOG executive committee meeting last week in Southfield, Mainland, FitzPatrick and Richards objected to the task force recommendations. They asked — and after a two-hour debate were given — until June 4 to present an alternative plan which would put nearly the entire burden of dues on the six current member counties. The City of

analysis

Detroit and a new, seventh county member — Livingston. Ravitz blew up. He conceded: "It might be managed if there was corresponding representation and power granted to the heavy payers, the counties. It threatens the cities, the townships and the school districts with the specter of county domination of the organization."

THE KEY WORD is "power." Time and again Ravitz used the term "power." One of the sore points at the meeting was a Detroit News story of the day before which said that counties were seeking "control" of SEMCOG.

Thus, the question one asked was: What power is there in SEMCOG? What is to be gained in a "power struggle?" The News story of 23 column inches gave no clue. This reporter talked to Ravitz for about 10 minutes and got no clear answer. The one-time Wayne State University sociologist talked about how counties, through reap-

portionment and some day through home rule, will become more influential units of government; how cities are sometimes wary of growing county services; how SEMCOG will become an increasingly important agency in the future.

But Ravitz couldn't answer the simple question: What "power" does SEMCOG have that anyone should fight over?

OAKLAND Chairman Richards called the power-grab charges "totally and completely out of place. I haven't got time" to grab control of SEMCOG. (FitzPatrick added: "You (Ravitz) really have questioned our motives. We have never discussed taking over SEMCOG.")

Mainland, author of the proposal, said: "There has been no revolt. The term, 'takeover' has been foreign to us. Nobody wants anyone out. We want more in."

It's not a matter of power, Mainland went on, but of "altruism." SEMCOG's leaders act as public trustees.

E. Robert Turner, SEMCOG's executive director and chief hired hand, took no sides in the debate. Under this writer's questioning, he saw little "power" in SEMCOG's hands.

Turner's theory is that SEMCOG is a service agency, not a metropolitan government. He sees SEMCOG as a method of providing a regional structure that local units can use to solve regional problems and from which local units can get help in training management talent, getting computer services, drawing out planning data.

Power grab? There's nothing to grab. That's what Mainland, FitzPatrick, Richards and Turner seemed to be saying.

THE COUNTY leaders don't have hard figures yet, but they visualize the counties taking the burden of payments with local units being charged a token sum. One of SEMCOG's chief problems during the recession has been that previously loyal members — such as Farmington School District and Redford Town-

ship — have dropped out as economy measures. Ravitz's objection to this plan has to do with finance as well as "power" politics. If one county quits under that setup, it could destroy SEMCOG, he argued.

The county leaders don't see it that way. First, they reply, SEMCOG's membership includes only 30 per cent of the eligible units anyway; their plan can only help by covering everyone.

Second, the counties' contribution is already so great (69 per cent) that one county's withdrawal could still damage or destroy the organization. As Richards put it in an interview:

"Look at Wayne County's portion. You pull \$101,000 out (the present dues) and you shaft SEMCOG. You pull \$125,000 out (the counties proposed dues level) and you still shaft SEMCOG."

SEMCOG is presently organized into four "blobs" — cities and villages, townships, educational districts, and counties. The county leaders' plan is still vague, but they talk in terms of making all the units in a single county into a bloc.

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