

Lansing deeply divided over what's next

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Cutting all school operating property taxes was the easy part. Now Michigan legislators are scrambling to replace the revenue or cut costs.

Democrats are deeply divided. House co-speaker Curtie Hertel of Detroit tapped Rep. William Keith of Garden City to head a Democratic task force on school funding and quality. "There is no question that the lost \$5.3 billion must be replaced," said Hertel. Hertel and Keith voted against the July 21 bill that eliminated two thirds of all public school revenue and 65 percent of all property taxes. Panel member Maxine Berman of Southfield was absent for the vote, but indicated she would have voted against it.

"Democrats hit a home run for the people," countered the minority leader Art Miller of Warren. He noted that Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Debbie Stabenow of Lansing sponsored the tax elimination amendment to a Republican bill that would have phased school taxes slightly.

That measure, Senate Bill 1, won 33 to 4 Senate approval with bipartisan support and 69 to 33 House approval with Democrats providing most of the opposition.

GOP hits costs

Republicans appear closer to unity and are emphasizing cost cuts before new taxes. "I am disappointed that some Democrats in Lansing, led by Sen. Debbie Stabenow, are asking the wrong question first," said Senate majority leader Dick Posthumus of Alton. "The first instinct was to propose enormous new tax increases before any serious discussions have taken place on educational quality or cost containment."

Added House co-speaker Paul Hiltgen of Holland: "We will focus on programs that have worked successfully in many school districts. . . Obviously, revenues will be part of the mix."

Meanwhile, two Oakland County GOP senators vowed to defend the revenues of their schools, which get little state aid and have been dependent largely on local property taxes.

"I'm concerned about reimbursement to local schools in Oakland County," said Sen. Michael Bouchard of Birmingham. Added Sen. Mat Dumoskie of Lake Orion: "I will remain vigilant to make sure that Oakland County does not unfairly shoulder the financial burden that this cut will represent."

Jondahl's warning

Rep. Lyn Jondahl of Okemos, the House Democrats' chief tax man, was playing the role of prophet after fighting the tax bill. Jondahl's point: The Legislature can't raise the full \$5 billion to replace lost property taxes.

Reason: The 1978 Headlee amendment to the Michigan Constitution. It limits total state taxation to the ratio between taxes and personal income that existed in 1977.

Bottom line: Only about \$4 billion in lost local taxes can be replaced by the state. Possible option: Give local districts back part of their property taxing power.

Jondahl said the House never should have passed SB 1 the day after the Senate did but should have "put this bill into conference, give calmer heads a chance to prevail."

Jondahl, like Stabenow, is a declared candidate for his party's gubernatorial nomination.

The tax cut is scheduled to take effect in July of 1994.

Kelley sought

Democrats want Attorney General Frank Kelley to rule on the impact of SB 1 on local school millage elections scheduled before the law was enacted but with wordings that may violate the law.

SB 1 says schools may no longer lump renewal and new revenue requests into a single proposal. Asked co-speaker Hertel: "If the

Problem solving workshop slated

An Oakland University Continuum Center workshop called "Confrontation: A Step Toward Problem Solving" will occur 7:10 p.m. Wednesday on the Auburn Hills campus.

Teacher Kristie McKenzie will show how to convert potentially hot situations into problem-solving opportunities.

EDUCATION

electors of a school district approve a millage rate which includes both a renewal and an increase presented as one question, is that approval valid and may the school district levy the approved millage?"

Gov. John Engler, a Republican, already had his answer. His state treasurer, Doug Roberts,

said Engler will sign SB 1 into law Aug. 19. Roberts said millage elections scheduled after that date, and which have combined renewals and increases, should be rescheduled or their ballot language should be changed.

What they said

Here is how various interest groups reacted to the Legislature's enactment of SB 1:

Michigan Association of School Boards executive director Justin King: "a knee-jerk reaction. . . If the Legislature wants to give school boards some control over the costs of education, they will put some teeth in the collective bargaining act covering school employees and repeal the Tenure Act."

Michigan Education Association president Julius Maddox: "Russian roulette. . . There

must be replacement dollars for any property tax reduction. . . When and if revenues are replaced, the state will determine how those dollars are doled out. . . eliminates local control."

League of Women Voters president Connie Ferguson: "grave concern." Since the Legislature can't replace all lost local revenue, schools face "a significant shortfall in funding" next year.

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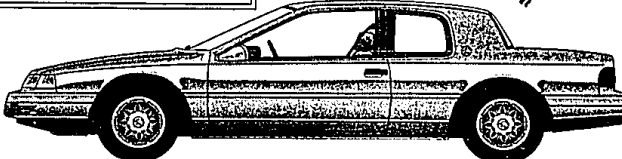
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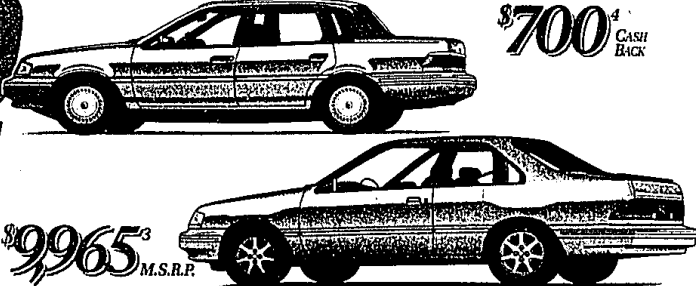
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