Control of local roads could waylay Engler repair plans

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Q. Can you — or anybody — explain simply why the debate over fixing roads has become so complicated?

A. We'll try. There are three elements:

■ More money. This breaks down into a) higher fuel and weight taxes, b) other savings from the budget and c) more federal aid.

■ Shifting control of 23,000 miles of county and municipal roads to the state, more than tripling the Department of Transportation's jurisdiction to 33,000 miles.

■ Auto insurance — requiring drivers to buy less, if they wish, in order to pay for higher fuel taxes.

Q. Any predictions on the tax question?

A. Yes. Up. Details depend on what deal is struck between the governor, Senate and House; between Democrats and Republicans. It's a money question, and money always can be compromised.

In the House, look for most of the 70 representatives who can't run in 1998 because of term limits to provide the bulk of the yes votes, leaving the first- and second-termers to vote no. That's what happened with the Proposal A tax increases of 1994.

Q. Gov. John Engler campaigns on "Promises made, promises kept." Did he ever promise to take over 23,000 miles of local roads?

A. No, not in 1990, not in 1994. Neither did any legislators. In fact, shifting control of local roads to the state never has been an issue in any circle.

Actually, legislative pressure has been in the other direction — returning county roads and county money to townships, as proposed by Sen. Loren Bennett, R-Canton, to the consternation of the Wayne County administration.

Q. So why raise the state control question now?

A. Politics. The effect has been to focus bad attention onto county and municipal road people, the ones who have been agitating for higher fuel taxes.

Engler certainly has shifted 180 degrees from his pre-1995 advocacy of local budgeting by school districts. On roads, Engler is a statist.

Q. Is there any merit to Engler's proposal to shift control of roads?

A. Sen. Douglas Carl, R-Macomb, says there is, and he chairs the Senate Transportation Committee. "Drivers don't care about jurisdictional disputes and about the 13 different classifications of roads. They care about safe roads," he said on a WXYZ-TV "Spotlight" program Sunday.

Sen. Jim Berryman, D-Adrian, opposes it. A former mayor, Berryman said, "If the governor is going tie his whole proposal to a takeover of local roads, the issue is dead. No. 1, neither the governor nor the Legislature has the credibility to take over another 23,000 miles.

"No. 2, it's a horrible idea. It raises questions about street openings, curb cuts, municipal rights-of-way; you have rights-of-way easements that the municipalities receive revenues from. Who's going to be responsible? Are locals going to have to go to the state every time they want to dig?

"I like local control."

Q. Say, isn't there some chance that public employees' unions are a target?

A. Some Democrats are muttering that. Counties' and big cities' road agencies are unionized. Engler proposes competitive bids for maintenance contracts, with counties and cities free to bid against private construction companies for state jobs.

The biggest fight will be state versus local control, an issue of principle. Compromise will be much tougher on the tax question.

Engler is making it a tie-bar issue — no more road money without a shift of control.

Republican Carl said it won't be any cheaper except to the extent that competitive bidding is introduced. Democrat Berryman argues counties have lower administrative costs, hence are more efficient, than the state.

Q. Any details about which miles of county and local roads Engler has his eye on?

A. No. Rep. Tom Kelly, D-Wayne, who serves on the House Appropriations subcommittee on transportation, said there's no bill drafted, as of last week.

Q. This insurance issue — ah, it looks as if the only way I can blunt the blow of higher fuel taxes is to cut my own insurance coverage. Are they serious?

A. Maybe not. Unlike the road control issue, the insurance isn't tie-barred to fuel taxes.

The insurance issue may "fall off the table," as labor negotiators say.

Doug Ross, a Democratic gubernatorial candidate, says Engler is favoring his buddies in the insurance industry.

Larry Owen, East Lansing lawyer, says Engler is favoring auto insurers. "Linking this phony insurance scheme to a gas tax is John Engler's way of confusing consumers who just want their roads fixed," he said.

Ron Steffens, president and CEO of AAA Michigan, the state's largest auto insurer, laughs at the suggestion insurers would benefit. "Our company would see its premiums reduced by $100 million," he said, adding the governor's plan would bring Michigan closer to a purer no-fault system.

Q. Everyone in Michigan knows, and many tourists here know, that big trucks are breaking up our roads — those 11-axle, 42-wheel monsters...

A. Everyone but the MDOT engineers and some politicians. Michigan's truck weight limit is 160,000 pounds. Other states limit trucks to 80,000 pounds.

Democrat Berryman said his bills would set an 80,000-pound limit. Republican Carl said weight-per-axle is more important.

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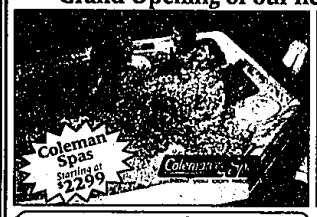

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