

Engler sees much road work ahead

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Within hours of getting a road improvement package approved in the legislature, Gov. John M. Engler said Michigan has its work cut out.

"We had a lot of work hitting us all at once," a tired, but confident Engler said Wednesday before about 100 people at a "Pinecones & Politics" breakfast sponsored by the Troy Chamber of Commerce at the Troy Marriott.

The governor was referring to the state's having to repair potholes, maintain highways and replace bridges almost simultaneously. "We have a lot of bridges that are 10 years older than their anticipated lifespan," he said. "And we have a lot of work ahead."

While it's a big job, Engler said the task is manageable as a result of the plan approved earlier in Lansing. The plan included compromise — with the governor touting "bipartisan leadership in the Legislature" in a press release — the road improvement package was decidedly Engler's and he's expected to sign it.

The cornerstone is a 4-cent per gallon hike in the gas tax, accompanied by some tax cuts designed to make the legislation more "revenue neutral." The increase is expected to generate \$350 million annually for roads.

There will undoubtedly be discussion about how the tax hike is split between the state and local interests, the governor said. "Local people will say they're getting a pittance," Engler said, "but the state has more responsibility."

The Road Commission for Oakland County is still crunching the numbers from the new road plan, said managing director Brent O. Bair. He didn't attend the breakfast meeting, but he was in Lansing when the package was approved and is knowledgeable about its content.

"Oakland County will certainly better off," he said. But the state does get what Bair considers to be a disproportionate share of the new road revenue. "From what we know now, the state will get a little more than half of the new money (compared to about 40 percent previously)," he lamented.

Reaction to the governor's presentation — and, presumably, his effort to get more road funding — was decidedly positive.

"He didn't break any new ground this morning," said Ross Kogel, president of Tire Wholesale Co., Inc., with outlets in Troy, Southfield and Cadillac. "But he did a nice job of stating and defending his position."

"He's different than a lot of politicians who go with the flow and tailor their remarks to their



Gov. John Engler
tired but confident

audience," Kogel said. "Gov. Engler doesn't mince words and he tells you exactly what he thinks. That's what he did this morning."

Even so, Kogel wondered if the governor's plan provides enough new money to do the job. "I don't think it would be so awful to have an even higher gasoline tax. I worry about those bridges."

Kimberly Davis Rodriguez, a partner with Workplace Management Systems in Troy, said the governor's comments were interesting and timely. "But I'm anxious to see how it (additional taxes for better roads) is played out," she said.

Eldon Thompson, the director of the Troy Chamber and CEO of the SOC Credit Union, said he is "delighted to hear the state is finally going to do something about bad roads."

But Thompson, who is also a Troy city councilman, doesn't expect the city to reap any windfall. "We'll see a little relief on roads," he said, "but not a big amount."

Road plan patches up friendship

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

They disagreed on the best way to fix and improve Michigan's roads, but with a new funding package almost in place, Gov. John M. Engler and county executive L. Brooks Patterson are in accord.

The governor isn't so happy with Brent O. Bair, the manager of the Road Commission for Oakland County — who, like Patterson, initially disagreed with Engler on road improvements.

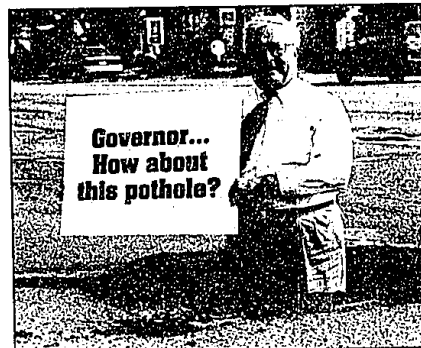
Engler took a swipe at Bair Wednesday during a breakfast meeting before the Troy Chamber of Commerce. "He supposedly works for Oakland County," Engler said without mentioning Bair by name. "But I wonder."

The governor was more specific in comments to the media. "I was referring to Brent Bair," Engler said. "Bair has irritated a lot of people, and he's burned a lot of bridges."

"Bair is an example of what's wrong with road commissions," Engler said.

Bair was not present for the governor's 20-minute talk. When informed of his comments, however, the head of the road commission said he isn't surprised. "He's told me as much face-to-face," said Bair, who was unapologetic.

"From what people in Lansing tell me, the governor needs



Governor...
How about
this pothole?

In deep: County Executive L. Brooks Patterson demonstrated the need for road repairs in a way that was sure to get the governor's attention.

somebody to pick on when things don't go exactly as he wants them to. I guess I'm it.

"I just represented the interests of Oakland County," Bair said.

Engler didn't go into much detail in his breakfast address, something Eldon Thompson, director of the Troy Chamber, noticed and accepted. "I enjoy hearing Gov. Engler," said Thompson. "He's very knowledgeable and very polished."

But the governor did seem to acknowledge being stung by criticism he wasn't doing enough to fix the roads. "Everyday the newspapers seemed to feature a picture of the pothole of the day," he said.

Standing in one of those pothole pictures was Brooks Patterson, who had campaigned for a higher increase in the gasoline tax and threatened a ballot referendum, if necessary.

"We talked about that picture," Engler said. "But we're okay. I consider him a friend, personally, and politically."

Patterson agreed. "I'm not fully happy with the road package," he said Wednesday. "But I'm not going to lose a friend over it."

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