

# Exec proposes tax cut to ease drain's cost

When L. Brooks Patterson presents his 1999 budget later this year, it's expected to include a proposal for a tax cut for Oakland County property owners.

While tax cuts are generally welcome, this one is expected to kick off a storm of controversy. It's intended to ease the financial burdens associated with environmental problems linked to the 12 Towns Drain.

There is no direct linkage between the proposed tax cut and the 12 Towns Drain — which has been involved in litigation about the Clean Water Act as enforced by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

But Patterson Tuesday said the tax cut — which will go to every Oakland property owner — will make it easier for those within the 12 Towns Drain to bear the inevitable cost — estimated at more than \$140 million — associated with expanding the capacity of the 2.2 mile retention basin as demanded by state and federal officials.

The 12 Towns Drain (which actually includes 14 communities) only affects residents in Birmingham, Berkley, Beverly Hills, Southfield, Troy, Clawson, Madison Heights, Ferndale, Hazel Park, Oak Park, Huntington Woods, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak and Royal Oak Township — all of which are in the Red Run Drainage System that eventually flows into polluted Lake St. Clair.

Property owners in other communities — who will get the proposed tax cut — are not directly impacted, so they can use the money however they chose.

Their turn is coming, said Patterson and others. So people in Rochester, West Bloomfield, Clarkston and Orion Township shouldn't be smug.

Oakland County encompasses

the headwaters of five river systems, officials note. So the problems impacting communities in the 12 Towns Drain will eventually affect other municipalities.

The county is facing a "crisis," Patterson said in his Feb. 26 State of the County Address.

The other steps — implemented or being implemented — are:

■ Hiring a nationally-known grants writer, who won't get paid without succeeding in getting federal dollars to help offset costs associated with the 12 Towns Drain.

■ Paying \$160,000 for a downspout survey program approved at the last meeting of the County Board — as a first step in assuring that runoff water is separated from storm sewers.

■ Making \$5 million available annually from the county's Delinquent Tax Revolving Fund to be used for environmental problems.

The financial burden linked to the 12 Towns Drain "threatens to overwhelm Oakland County communities," Patterson said Tuesday when asked about his tax cut proposal. "It threatens our economic viability."

The executive said he will outline the proposed tax cut in May or June when he presents the 1999 budget proposals to county commissioners. Since a tax cut will mean less revenue for the county, the entire budget process will be impacted.

County commissioners are expected to be receptive, according to Sue Ann Douglas, R-Rochester, who finance committee chairwoman. "We recognize the problem," she said, "and we're willing to cooperate."

Commissioner Donald Jensen, R-Birmingham, wants to see how the proposed cut will impact services. "I'm willing to look at a tax cut," he said. "But I want to see what services have to be

■ '(Cost for the 12 Towns Drain) threatens to overwhelm Oakland County communities.'

L. Brooks Patterson  
—county executive

reduced."

But the proposed tax cut is so small, it's almost meaningless, according to many of those familiar with the executive's proposal. "Every little bit helps," Southfield city administrator Robert Block said. "But the tax cut is so small in comparison to the overall costs, it's almost meaningless."

The tax cut — about \$16.05 a year to the owner of a house valued at \$200,000 — isn't enough to cover the entire costs associated with environmental problems, the executive acknowledged. But it's an important initial step.

"It's going to cost property owners," Patterson said. "And the state and federal governments are going to have to pony up some money."

Birmingham city manager Thomas Markus gives Patterson — and county drain commissioner George Kuhn — credit for taking some initiative. But he said Patterson's proposal doesn't go far enough.

What would be so terrible, Markus said, about the county paying a share of the costs associated with the 12 Towns Drain. "In the name of economic development, the county gave \$3 million to Chrysler," he said. Markus was referring to seed money to be matched with state dollars for a northbound entrance to I-75.

"In the name of economic development, why can't the county give more to the communities in the 12 Towns Drain?"

## Fieger makes candidacy official

Beginning today the controversial Southfield-based attorney Geoffrey Fieger can be known as "announced gubernatorial candidate" Fieger.

Fieger has announced a 10 a.m. press conference today in Lansing to announce his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for governor — a candidacy that he had touted for months.

A press statement released Wednesday said Fieger will target incumbent Gov. John M. Engler for, among other things, his "abominable neglect of the state's infrastructure for the past eight years" and "the con-

temptible siphoning of money away from education which should have been provided by the Michigan Lottery."

The press statement doesn't mention that Fieger will face three other candidates in the party's Aug. 4 primary election — Larry Owen an attorney from East Lansing; Douglas Ross, a former state director of commerce who lives in West Bloomfield; and Edward Hamilton, a Chrysler executive who lives in Troy.

One of those primary opponents — apparent front-runner Owen — told local Democrats on Tuesday night that Fieger

would be welcome in the race. "I've spoken with Mr. Fieger on several occasions," Owen told Democrats during the party's monthly meeting at the Oakland County Auditorium in Pontiac. "And I would welcome his candidacy. He's exciting in ways that I am not."

Fieger hasn't been overly critical of Owen and other Democrats.

But he has leveled numerous blasts at Engler, who Fieger has characterized as a "religious nut" because of the governor's opposition to Dr. Jack Kevorkian — Fieger's most famous client.

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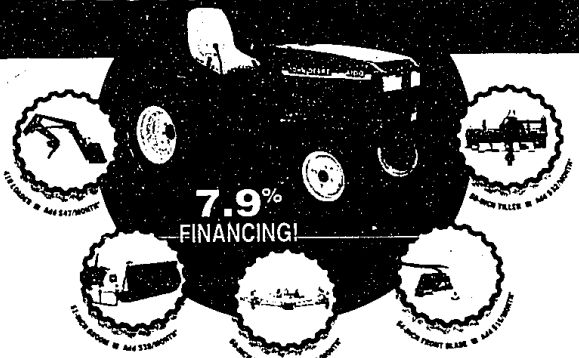


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