

House has chance to write airport management history

The stunning deal between Gov. John Engler and Wayne County Chief Executive Ed McNamara to create an independent oversight authority for Wayne County's Metropolitan and Willow Run airports is hardly out of the woods. Under the proposal, oversight would be given to a seven-member body, with four appointments coming from the Wayne County exec, two by the governor and one by the Wayne County Commission.

Last week's 26-10 favorable vote in the state Senate moved the measure to the House, where business as usual politics could gum up the works.

Lots of folks with very dubious motives are awfully interested in sideling what could be one of the most significant innovations in Michigan in many years. Others, realizing that the airport is likely to be the biggest economic engine in the state, have a vested interest in getting some leverage over it.

One such group is the Wayne County Commission, historically a remarkably ineffective bunch of minor league politicians. (Quick now, win an all-expense tour of the Wayne County building by naming three members of the Commission! One member?) The Commission launched a PR effort in opposition last week featuring poorly attended public forums and guest columns in the big city papers.

The Commission is whining that the authority would "take control of the airport out of public hands." It's obvious that in the Commission's eyes, "public hands" really means the Commission's. Anybody who has followed the wheelings and dealings of the Commission over the years would be thrilled to pry its public hands off anything and everything possible. Examples of good things the Commission has opposed over the years include charter government, creation of a county executive and elimination of the notorious elected road commission and drain commission.

Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick also wants an appointment. That idea got voted down in the Senate on the grounds that the airport is owned by Wayne County, not Detroit. But it's likely to come up again in the House.

And House Minority Leader Samuel "Buz" Thomas is talking about giving Engler and McNamara some of the appointments to the oversight board, but also letting their respective successors name some appointees as well. Up to

now, both the governor and the chief executive have firmly said "no deal."

Therein lies the guts of the politics. Both Engler and McNamara are refusing to modify their proposal in any way because they're worried about the slippery slope problem, i.e. once you accept one change in your program, what's to prevent lots of changes that add up to gutting the idea?

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Holding the line will not be easy, especially in the House, where some Democratic votes will be necessary to get a two-thirds majority that will give the measure immediate effect. "Immediate effect" means that Engler and McNamara would do the appointing, rather than their (presently unknown) successors. Since both men are known qualities and both have staked their prestige on creating an independent oversight board for the airports, I'd prefer to have them doing the appointing, especially when I consider who might wind up becoming the new Wayne County chief executive.

Having the measure take immediate effect is also important because the airport is on the verge of selling \$900 million worth of bonds for renovation of old terminals, and having a proper oversight authority in place will make a big difference in the cost of the financing. House members, especially, are prone to be pulled here and there by interest groups with parochial if not self-serving motives. This is normal in a legislative setting, especially when serious issues like the state budget are still unsettled.

But the House has a real chance to undo a long history of scandal-ridden and sometimes inept management at the airport by creating a first-class oversight structure, complete with an audit committee and full public scrutiny. Putting both Wayne County Metro and Willow Run under the powerful, coherent, non-political oversight represents a vital first step in welding them together into what could be the most powerful economic development institution Michigan has ever seen. I'd hate to be a House member who knowingly throws that opportunity away.

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Hugh Gallagher

Rothwell injects a welcome shot of optimism on economy

Doug Rothwell is a cup half full kind of guy.

The president and CEO of the Michigan Economic Development Corp. looks at the recent higher unemployment figures and sees positive news.

Sure unemployment in Michigan is running about 6 percent. But that puts the state about in the middle of national unemployment. In the past, with our over dependence on the auto industry, we'd be near the top in unemployment. Rothwell said that based on auto industry layoffs, Michigan unemployment would be closer to 11 percent.

That's the right attitude for someone whose job is to attract jobs. He sees Michigan building on its auto heritage to become a leader in other high-tech industries and maintaining its lead as the auto industry moves into brave new territory. Rothwell shared his views with HomeTown Communications Network editors Feb. 28.

Of course, he was there to tout the work of the MEDC, a public corporation that consolidates Michigan's economic development programs. He's competitive. "I want to be No. 1, who cares about being No. 5."

Recently, Site Selection magazine gave its top award, the Governor's Award, to Illinois. But as fast as a Canadian Olympic committee member, Rothwell jumped on the decision. He said they changed the rules at "the 11th hour" and if they hadn't Michigan would have won the award. As it is Michigan was named the No. 1 location for new and expanded business facilities (the really important award according to an MEDC release).

Rothwell's visit came at an opportune time. The opening of the new McNamara Terminal at Metro airport is an essential element in the growth of Southeast Michigan. Rothwell points to Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport as an airport that has generated economic development. The same opportunities exist for the Detroit area with its two close, complementary, Wayne County-owned airports—Metro and Willow Run.

When asked if developing a strong urban center around the airports would be another dagger aimed at the city of Detroit, Rothwell said Detroit will benefit from having a strong gateway to the region.

But obviously the problems faced by Detroit are a major concern for Rothwell. Even cup half full guys have to be a little hesitant in their enthusiasm when discussing the big city.

"Michigan will never be what it can be until Detroit is what it can be," Rothwell said. "But we can't let the city off the hook for its accountability."

As a free-market conservative and a John Engler appointee, Rothwell is a firm believer that tax dollars aren't the only solution to economic and social problems.

It's not simply a matter of bringing up fine new programs," Rothwell said.

He said Detroit has to take control of its own structural problems. He said he is willing to work with the city's leaders but he's not about to "tell" them what to do, nor would they welcome that approach.

But, while Rothwell doesn't see government spending as a cure-all for urban problems or state development, he also parts company with the conservative Mackinac Center, which is critical of the MEDC as being an interference in the market equation.

"Our philosophy is to support winners, the companies that have a good business model," he said.

But he argued that for businesses to compete globally, the state can help by building on the models of those winning companies.

"We do economic development inexpensively. We, as a state, have to invest more if we want to play in the defining industries of the future," he said.

Those industries include life-sciences which includes biochemical research, medical centers, pharmaceutical companies and university research and development; information technology and broadband development; and, yes, the auto industry.

The big auto companies are investing back in the state and Rothwell argues we should do everything we can to encourage that notion. Ford in planning a new Rouge facility, GM has just opened a new facility near Lansing.

And just around the corner are new technological breakthroughs, such as the hydrogen fuel cell cars, introduced in January by GM and high on the list of all the auto companies. Rothwell believes it should be high on the list for the state as well.

Whether you agree with his economic philosophy or not, Rothwell brings a welcome shot of optimism for the economy of a state with an abundance of talent, natural resources and a solid track record as a business leader.

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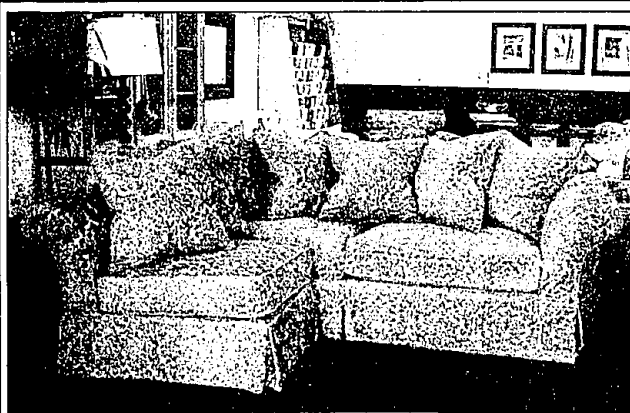
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