

County, state deal produces funds for road project

BY DAN WEST
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County and state officials reached a tentative deal that may end a 45-year-old dispute to finance much-needed traffic relief for motorists on Northwestern Highway and Orchard Lake Road.

Once a formal deal is signed, design work and rights-of-way purchasing can begin and construction on the first phase of a \$100 million project in West Bloomfield and Farmington Hills could begin in two to four years.

"No deal is signed yet, but it's encouraging that all the parties involved are talking," said Craig Bryson, spokesman for the Road Commission for Oakland County. "We want to see something done to improve the traffic situation there."

A tentative pact was reached recently after months of talks among representatives from the road commission and Michigan Department of Transportation, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson and State Rep. Marc Shulman, a West Bloomfield Republican who is the House Appropriations Chairman.

"This whole thing has dragged on for so long, but the only thing that's changed has been the increase in traffic," Patterson said. "We had to break the log jam and we finally did it."

"There's a light at the end of the tunnel for the motorists who travel in that area,"

According to Shulman, the deal calls for \$40-\$45 million in immediate funding from various state and county sources for design, property purchase and

construction of the project's first phase.

This phase involves turning the intersection of 14 Mile, Northwestern and Orchard Lake into a roundabout, a circular route that controls vehicle movements to the three roads without traffic lights. Also, phase one plans would resurface and expand Orchard Lake Road into a six-lane boulevard between 14 Mile and Maple, and improve the intersections with both roads.

"This alone would relieve 70-75 percent of the traffic congestion in that area," Patterson said.

The rest of the story

The rest of the project entails expanding 14 Mile and Maple between Orchard Lake and M-5. These elements would be com-

pleted later, but Shulman said once work begins, he hopes momentum builds to find the money to complete the entire project.

"Once you get something like this going, others will contribute money to get this done once you show how everyone is committed," Shulman said.

This deal comes on the heels of a lengthy feasibility study coordinated by West Bloomfield Township, city of Farmington Hills, MDOT and the road commission. This recently completed engineering study produced plans for the entire \$100 million project.

If finalized, this deal would conclude a 45-year legal spat over Northwestern Highway between the road commission and state highway officials.

Back in 1957, road commission

files indicate it made a deal with state highway officials to construct a \$37 million extension of Northwestern from Eight Mile to U.S. 23 in Fenton, however, the road expanded only to Orchard Lake Road, just past 14 Mile.

The state said \$25 million in bonds toward financing the project, but the state and county disputed which organization is responsible for repaying the debt on the bond sale.

The county paid some money toward the project, but the party agreed Northwestern would remain a state trunkline.

This led to a series of court actions.

In 1962, plans changed to extend Northwestern to end at a would-be expanded route of I-275.

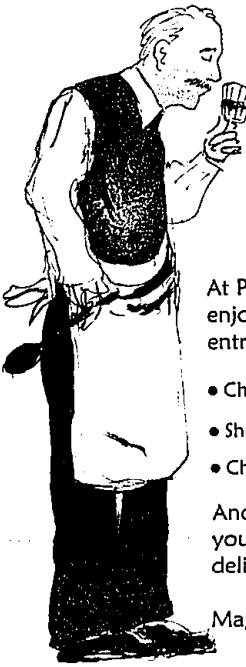
In 1989, MDOT announced plans to expand Northwestern

from Orchard Lake to Haggerty for \$26 million. Development in the area, opposition by residents and court actions halted these plans.

The state continued to earmark \$26 million for a Northwestern project, but held it. This was in response to road commission threats to sue the state again, seeking a judge's order to impose contract terms approved by both sides in the 1950s and 60s.

Meanwhile, Orchard Lake has turned into one of the Oakland's busiest and roughest roads, fueled by traffic pouring off Northwestern.

Adding to the bumpy road, Bryson said road commission officials planned minimal repairs to Orchard Lake for years in anticipation of a major project.



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Clarenceville scheduling awaits final approval on next agenda

BY JONI HUBBARD
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Block scheduling will become a reality at Clarenceville High School, but not until the School Board's next meeting.

Board members decided to place approval of a plan created by school staff members on their March 14 consent agenda. That list of non-controversial items is usually passed with one motion.

Board chair Matthew Bootcher explained the delay would give fellow board member Gary Garrison time to get a few questions answered.

Garrison expressed general support for the idea and made the motion to give the plan tentative approval, after a team of teachers and Principal David Simowski presented Clarenceville's own version of block, which is a hybrid of two established programs.

"Well over half the staff were involved in bringing us to this point," Simowski said. "We own it, and what we are going to propose to you tonight will work, because the staff created it."

Committee chairperson Cindy Raby, who teaches social studies and was once a Clarenceville student, said the switch to longer "blocks" of class time reflects what she's always known. "I believe this district holds children as their number one priority. I believe this school district removes the distractions and barriers to help kids learn."

As they studied this issue over the past three years, explained music teacher Troy Nelson, staff members decided to create a plan that fit their school.

"We've taken a number of different models and made it our own," he said.

A hybrid

The staff has combined elements of the "Alternating 8 Block," a schedule that designates odd and even numbered blocks of class time for different days during the week, and "4 x 4

■ The advantages are that half the students will have four classes a semester and half who take advantage of the 'skinnyies' will have five, still fewer than the six classes for which the students are currently responsible.

Block," four classes, 90 minutes long, every day, with coursework changing each semester.

The Clarenceville proposal creates "skinnyies," or 45-minute classes kids can take in their first hour Monday through Friday. They can also opt for a 52-minute class. The shorter times accommodate classes like band, choir and foreign languages, where meeting every day helps students retain what they learn, Nelson explained.

The second block on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays will be a regular, 73-minute class. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students will have "Trojan Time," for assemblies, seminars, testing, career awareness activities and class meetings. The last two blocks of the day, each 88 minutes, are reserved for full-semester classes.

The advantages, Raby said, are that half the students will have four classes a semester and half who take advantage of the "skinnyies" will have five, still fewer than the six classes for which students are currently responsible.

Students will be encouraged not to take more than two "core" classes - math, science, English and social studies - in one semester, although some high achievers might, Raby added. Also, students will be able to earn 7.5 credits during the year, with an increase in the offering

of elective classes.

Nelson said the longer classes also give teachers more one-on-one time with students, because they have a smaller number of student contacts during the day. Course acceleration is possible, and there would be more opportunities for "dual enrollment" allowing students to take college courses, Raby added.

Teachers have also set up a plan to evaluate the change over a period of three years. They'll make a baseline assessment of grades, test scores, discipline issues and other areas at the conclusion of this year, then take a survey using a random sampling of students in the first year and expand on that to include all students in subsequent years.

"After three years, we figure we'll have all the information we need," Raby said.

They'll be looking for changes in grades, how students relate to teachers and effects on discipline problems.

Simowski was left to deliver the bad news and said there'd be three areas of cost. Staffing is the most expensive with the addition of three teachers, one of whom would have been added anyway due to increased enrollment. About \$10,000 is allotted for new textbooks and materials, with expanded elective offerings. Finally, Simowski asked for funds to continue staff development.

"We think the pay-off is going to far exceed the money we're going to spend," he said.

Superintendent Dr. Tom Tattan said the district began setting aside funds three years ago, with the idea that if block scheduling caught on, money wouldn't become an issue.

Board members supported the idea, which Bootcher said was among the most highly scrutinized proposal he'd ever seen.

"It looks wonderful," added board member Sharon Simpson. "You really see all the work you put into it."

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