

Granholm's first order of business? Budget crisis

In reflecting on Michigan's current budget crisis, I am forcefully reminded of how apt the philosopher George Santayana was when he observed that, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The first state budget crisis I remember was in 1959, when I was an undergraduate working on *The Michigan Daily*, the student newspaper at the University of Michigan. Democratic Gov. G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams faced a legislature solidly controlled by hostile Republicans.

Williams proposed a combination of tax increases and budget cuts; the legislature trashed it. The legislature passed its own mix of budget cuts and tax hikes; Williams vetoed it. Partisan deadlock ensued. The result was that Michigan state employees experienced a payless payday before Williams and the legislature finally worked out a compromise.

When Gov. James Blanchard took office in 1989, he inherited Milliken. Although there is still some dispute about the size of the deficit, there is no doubt the remedy Blanchard proposed — a big hike in the state income tax — was deeply unpopular. The tax increase passed, and as a result Democrats lost control of the state Senate in 1984 and haven't won it back to this day.

Gov. John Engler says he inherited a \$1.1 billion deficit from the Blanchard administration when he took office in 1991. The budget cuts Engler rammed through the legislature over the next couple of years were drastic. So much so that you still hear Democrats complaining about "the heartless Engler administration" when they talk about the politics of the time.

And the current recession and the collapse in state tax revenues have now produced yet another state budget crisis. Best estimates are the budget for this fiscal year that began in October is at least \$500 million out of whack. Outgoing Gov. Engler, who has vowed he won't leave office with the state budget in deficit, will issue an executive order this week making a reported \$470 million in expense cuts.

On the chopping block will be revenue sharing for counties, cities and townships, state support for higher education and across the board cuts for all state departments. The only items that Engler won't consider are road construction projects (because they're funded in part by federal road taxes) and the \$6,700 per-pupil foundation grant for K-12 schools.

To take effect, the cuts will have to be approved by both appropriations committees during the short legislative lame-duck session that resumed

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this week, but they don't have to be passed by the GOP-controlled full House or Senate.

And now comes Gov.-elect Jennifer Granholm, another in this long line of Michigan governors-elect who came into office facing a budget crisis.

In Granholm's case, the best deficit estimate for the 2003 fiscal year that begins next October is a whopping \$1.8 billion, which is why her transition team has been working feverishly ever since the election on budget matters. She's lucky Bob Nattaly, the able budget director during the Blanchard administration, has volunteered his time to help out.

They won't have much time. Once sworn into office, Gov. Granholm will have to give her State of the State address in January and submit a balanced budget (a state constitutional requirement, unlike the federal budget) in March. And they'll be facing a legislature with both houses controlled by Republicans.

No one expects another payless payday deadlock between governor and legislature. But there is a real risk that joint inexperience — Granholm is relatively new to Lansing and term limits have tossed out most of the experienced hands in the legislature — will result in unintended bad consequences.

Worse, because drastic decisions about the budget have to be taken so quickly, there is probably not enough time for a thoughtful, far-reaching, possibly radical review of the structure and workings of state government. This is certainly what candidate Granholm was thinking about when she repeatedly talked about how she wanted to "think outside the box."

But most budget decisions that involve cutting expenses have historically been incremental, i.e. they cut existing operations by such and such percent. That approach might get the budget balanced, but it's not well-designed to promote the kind of imaginative thinking that's needed about the workings and expenses of state government.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at ppower@homecom.net.



Joni Hubred

Exchange Club speaker recalls events of 9/11

FBI Agent Rob Casey won't forget where he was when terrorists attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. He even has photographic evidence.

Speaking to a full house at a recent Farmington Exchange Club meeting, Casey said he was part of a detail working on an identity theft case. He showed a photograph agents took while staking out abandoned homes, where thieves would have goods sent after purchasing them with stolen credit cards.

Shortly after planes hit the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, Casey said he was on the third crash site, a field near Shanksville, Pa., which is east of Pittsburgh. United Airlines Flight 93 had taken off late that morning from New York City.

"This was the first battlefield in the war on terrorism," Casey said. "The first battle was when the heroes of Flight 93 sacrificed their lives to save lives on the ground."

With painstaking care, federal agents worked around the clock to piece together what little was left of the airplane, her crew and passengers. And there isn't much when a plane going 575 miles per hour hits the ground.

"That plane was going so fast when it hit, the cockpit windows blew in when it hit the ground," Casey said, showing photos of the crash site. "The passengers didn't have a chance to feel pain."

Agents set up a perimeter three miles around the point of impact. They combed a wooded area and lake nearby for debris, but there wasn't much to be found.

"The earth absorbed the plane," Casey said. "If someone didn't tell you, you'd have never known a plane went down, looking at this from the air."

In fact, a senior citizen who was fishing in the pond when the crash occurred said he noticed something falling from the sky, but wasn't disturbed enough by it to stop fishing.

The initial crater was 100 feet deep and 100 feet wide, Casey said. Because the plane was inverted, it went in nose first. Fortunately, the voice and data recorders were in the rear of the plane and were recovered within 48 hours.

Piecing together evidence from those boxes, phone calls passengers were able to make to their families and information relayed to

Cleveland's air traffic control center, officials came up with a timeline of events that relate the bravery of passengers who essentially forced the crash landing far from its intended target.

Casey said Cleveland's staff heard a struggle in the cockpit around 9:30 a.m., shortly after United Airlines sent a message to all flights about the World Trade Center tragedy. Two Arabic speaking men took control of the flight, and the pilot told passengers that hijackers were on board and had a bomb.

Between 9:40 and 10 a.m., two hijackers were watching over passengers, having moved them all into the rear of the plane. Casey said the terrorists never prevented passengers from using their cell phones; in fact, one man had four conversations with his wife.

Tom Burnett's wife told him that hell had been unleashed, and said, "You have to do something," Casey related.

"There were some big guys. One flight attendant had a black belt in karate," he said. "One passenger was a pilot. They had hope. There was a chance."

The pilot took evasive action, knocking people off their feet. Todd Beemer uttered his now-famous line, "Let's roll," and within moments, it was all over, leaving not just a crash site, but a crime scene.

Agents were especially careful, Casey said, because evidence gathered would be used to prosecute terrorists who forced the plane off course, with the likely goal of crashing it in Washington, D.C.

Also of importance was providing some comfort to the families of those who were killed.

"It's very important for some family members to have a body part of some sort of a burial," Casey said. "I'm proud to say we were able to give every family something, some remains of their loved one."

More than a year has passed since Sept. 11, 2001, but Casey's story still carries emotional impact. It reminds us that true bravery requires self-sacrifice and that heroes are not born of difficult circumstances, but how we face them.

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments in person or by mail at 3341 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335; by phone, (248) 477-5450; by FAX, (248) 477-9722; or via e-mail, jhubred@e.homecom.net

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