

Michigan ROUNDUP

February 18, 1993

Legislative Week in Review

- Despite a snowstorm-shortened schedule, **property tax reform** debate continued to attract the lion's share of attention in the House this week. Three separate plans now vie for House Taxation Committee approval. Gov. John Engler's version, as embodied in SB 146 already passed by the Senate, has so far faced stiff opposition from a bipartisan House proposal that trades off property tax relief and a guaranteed base level of support for local schools for an income tax hike. The House version claims more than 30 co-sponsors from both parties. In committee testimony, a coalition of state educational and business organizations, including the State Chamber of Commerce and the Michigan Association of School Administrators, weighed in with a third version of the reform plan. This latest proposal would offer a one-percent sales tax hike to help offset local school revenues lost through property tax cuts. Lawmakers predict certain consensus on property tax relief, with compromise on allaying the cuts' effects on local schools the subject of negotiations in the weeks ahead.
- Governor Engler's signature this week on PA 2 (SB 134) **extends the deadline** for presentation of his budget recommendations from February 12 to March 19. The new deadline is for this year only; Engler requested the extension in order to present a biennial budget package to the legislature.
- A change passed last week by the Senate in the imminent **ban on assisted suicide** may be amended by the House to make the ban effective immediately, rather than on April 1 as provided in its current language. SB 211 clarifies that hospice health care workers dispensing pain medication to terminal patients will not be affected by the new ban. The House is expected to take up the measure next week, which could be used to move up the effective date of the ban itself.
- After hours of debate and several amendments, the **unemployment benefits bill** passed last week by the Senate was considerably moderated. Still, SB 2 split the chamber along party lines, with Fowlerville Republican Fred Dillingham joining the Democratic caucus in opposing it. The bill would eliminate inflation indexing for maximum benefits and toughen eligibility requirements—although by less than originally proposed. Provisions inserting a one-week waiting period for benefits were removed on the Senate floor.
- Senate votes this week cleared the path for a statewide **recreational trails** system. SBs 203, 224–25 would create a Michigan Trailways Fund, authorize the state to acquire railroad right-of-ways for trails, and authorize the designation of trails on state-owned land.

Political News

- A former associate deputy administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was named by Governor Engler this week as the state's **Great Lakes "czar."** According to Associated Press reports, G. Tracy Mehan's cabinet-level appointment gives him unprecedented authority over Great Lakes environmental policies. The Department of Natural Resources' Office of the Great Lakes will report to Mehan, rather than to DNR Director Roland Harnes. The appointment, decried by critics as evidence of the administration's disdain for the DNR's operations, has thoroughly eclipsed director Harnes's proposed reorganization of the agency that he unveiled to the Natural Resources Commission only last week. The move is said to reflect in part gubernatorial concern over the DNR's allegedly impolitic handling of Great Lakes cleanup plans with a U.S.-Canadian joint international commission.
- A former state Senate staff member was named this week as **deputy treasurer**. Madhu Anderson assumed her new duties this week; she will be the department's legislative liaison and will help develop state tax policy.
- Although results were marginally better than last year, most state students' **reading and math skills** rate less than "satisfactory" on standardized Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) exams given annually to all students in grades four, seven, and ten. On 1992 MEAP results released this week, the best overall scores were for the science test, where 71 percent of fifth-graders and 57 percent of eighth-graders achieved a satisfactory rating; 46.5 percent of eleventh-graders achieved a satisfactory score. The MEAP scores also revealed large gaps between the scores of white and minority pupils.
- The State Liquor Control Commission voted last week to approve the governor's requested **10 percent liquor price hike**. The Engler administration estimates that the increase will bring in another \$15 million in revenues this fiscal year. Opponents, however, aren't drinking to that, predicting that higher prices will reduce consumption and send residents across state boundaries in search of bargain booze.