

Michigan ROUNDUP

October 1, 1993

Legislative Week in Review

- With the start of a new fiscal year only hours away, lawmakers passed the last of **1993-94 budget bills** late Wednesday evening. The Agriculture Department budget had been held up largely due to disagreement over a controversial Pontiac Silverdome subsidy it contained. The subsidy was struck from last year's budget, and Gov. John Engler has threatened to veto the portion of the budget bill (SB 522) appropriating the contested \$800,000. A Natural Resources Department budget (SB 530) of nearly \$96 million in general funds passed easily on a 63-38 House vote. Passage of the General Government budget (SB 527) was complicated by dissension over increased funding for state courts. Although court fees will be increased statewide, funding increases will benefit only a minority of the state's counties.
- The **sale of the Accident Fund**, a state agency that sells workers' compensation insurance, inched closer Wednesday with Senate passage of House versions of a six-bill package putting the 80-year-old insurer up for bid. Most of the bills were not given immediate effect, meaning bids could not be accepted until next April. The one bill with immediate effect is SB 568, authorizing Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan to compete as a potential purchaser of the Accident Fund despite BCBSM's nonprofit status.
- Following a bipartisan agreement between committee co-chairs, much deferred **sentencing guideline legislation** passed the House this week in the form of HBs 4684 and 4782. The measures create a 19-member commission charged with developing new guidelines. According to Gongwer News Service, the new rules would aim to reduce disparities, treat offenses against persons more seriously than offenses against property, make sentences more proportionate to the seriousness of the offense and the offender's prior record, and specify circumstances under which alternatives to state prison sentences are appropriate.

Political News

- U.S. Sen. Donald Riegle's **surprise retirement announcement** this week left State Sen. Lana Pollock (Ann Arbor) feeling infinitely less lonesome as a Democratic contender for his seat. The power vacuum created by Riegle's decision to give up incumbency quickly sucked up an admittedly speculative but impressively long list that included U.S. Ambassador to Canada James Blanchard, State Sen. John Kelly, House Co-speaker Curtis Hertel, Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara, and Macomb County Prosecutor Carl Marlinga—who had earlier dropped out of the race. The front-running Republican candidate for Riegle's seat, former state GOP Chairman Spencer Abraham, also seems likely to face stiffer competition from his own party as the following Republicans are said to be eyeing a run for the now-open seat: U.S. Rep. Dave Camp (Midland), former U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell (Plymouth), State Sens. Dick Posthumus (Alto) and Gil DiNello (Clinton Township), Birmingham attorney Jim Elsmann, and radio talk show host Ronna Romney.
- The University of Michigan's hiring of President James Duderstadt five years ago constituted a violation of the state's **Open Meetings Act**, according to a state supreme court ruling issued this week. In a verdict rife with implications for Michigan State University's more recent and more publicly controversial search process, the court required the UM Board of Regents to release search records detailing regents' travel and expenses. Like the MSU search, UM leaders used a subcommittee constituting less than a quorum of the governing board to undertake initial candidate screening. The high court majority opinion held that the entire selection process must be conducted in public, although UM will not be required to repeat its presidential search and selection.
- The Board of State Canvassers approved this week language for a petition to **stall school finance reform**. An Oakland County-based group called Citizens Alliance for Responsible Education is seeking signatures to stop implementation of SB 1, the legislation eliminating property taxes for school operations. The group threatens to force a referendum on the issue in the November 1994 election unless state lawmakers have implemented a plan to reform school finance and provide operating revenues to local districts.
- Long-time Engler aide and senior policy advisor Dennis Schornack has been named director of the new **Office of Health Care Reform and Policy Development** established last week within the governor's office. The executive directive creating the new niche says it will "allow a coordinated response to national health reform plans and the development of specific state reforms."