

# After Labor Day School Start Could Help School Budgets

## State House OK's Bill To Mandate Start Date After Holiday

By Karen Gould

The Michigan House of Representatives, in a June 30 roll call vote that crossed party lines, approved a bill that would mandate that Michigan public schools and public school academies begin the school year after the Labor Day holiday.

HB 4083, which passed the House 69 to 40 and still needs Senate and gubernatorial consensus before it can become law, is designed to boost revenues for the tourism industry by adding another week to the summer recess.

Most schools in Michigan begin before Labor Day. Many northern Michigan schools begin after Labor Day.

Tourism is the state's second leading industry and the Labor Day holiday has traditionally marked the end of the summer season. Not only would a delayed school start boost tourist travel for that first week in September, it would allow businesses to retain valuable student help through the busy holiday.

"Michigan is a tourist oriented state and schools should be starting after Labor Day," said Jack Dehring, school superintendent at Mackinac Island,

which starts classes after Labor Day.

If history is any indicator, House Bill 4803 faces an uphill climb. Similar bills have failed to garner the needed support. Last year HB 6058 never even made it to a House vote, having been discharged at the committee level.

The difference this year may be Michigan's weak economy. It tied with Mississippi for the highest state unemployment rate in May, 7.1 percent. The national rate was 5.1 percent.

"Our economy is down and it hasn't come back as quickly as expected," said Representative Gary McDowell (D-Rudyard), who is one of the bill's sponsors. People are more receptive at looking to help the economy and realize the importance of tourism now, he said.

He said he didn't know how Governor Jennifer Granholm feels about the measure, but the governor's press secretary, Elizabeth Boyd, said, "The Governor has not taken a position on legislation that would affect the starting date of the school year."

In 2000, the House successfully initiated a three-year trial law that prohibited schools from holding classes on the Friday before Labor Day. The law was made permanent in 2001.

Supporters of the new bill say

its passage brings several additional benefits, including saving school districts money by reducing utility costs, especially for air conditioning.

School employees have been and continue to be against the measure.

Opposition to the House Bill 4803 includes The Michigan Federation of Teachers, The Michigan Association of School Boards, The Michigan Association of School Administrators, and The Middle and Elementary School Principals Association. Members of these organizations say they want to keep local control over school calendars. Currently, district school boards have the authority to set start dates. They also argue that families are busy in August with athletic practices and band camps, which already keep them from traveling. The bill's opponents note that it does not mandate a starting date for private schools, nor does it prohibit teacher in-service days from taking place before the holiday. Local boards would continue to set their own holidays and breaks.

Proponents of the law say school districts would be one of the bigger beneficiaries of the extended summer tourism season.

"The post Labor Day opening is pro-Michigan," said Bob Benser, president of Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau. "It's good for Michigan families, Michigan travel and tourism, and Michigan schools,"

All aspects of the proposed later school year opening are related, said Mr. Benser. It allows students to work longer and save more money for their future education and it increases sales tax revenue for the state, which adds to the education budget.

Rep. McDowell agrees. "The sales tax," he said, "basically helps fund schools. It is the main contributor to the school aid fund."

"We've got to look at the greater picture of helping the economy and education," he said. "Hopefully, now there won't be resistance to the bill as in the past."

The school start date change would be significant for Mackinac Island, where most tourist dollars come from downstate visitors.

"When you look around the Island after Labor Day, you see the difference in the number of people," said Barb Fisher, secretary at Mackinac Island Public School.

"It doesn't make sense," said Mr. Benser, "because tourism is the second largest industry in the state. It's really a no brainer."

August used to be the best month for travel and tourism in Michigan, but now, with schools starting earlier, many families take their vacations in July, say retailers.

Mark Eby, whose family has owned Castle Rock in St. Ignace since 1927, has the records to support the claim. From the late 1950s through the 1970s, he

said, August always beat July in the number of climbers on Castle Rock. In the 1980s, when some downstate schools started to open before Labor Day, traffic in August showed a major drop.

According to Mr. Eby, from late June through the first three weeks of August, Castle Rock sees an average of about 750 climbers each day, Monday through Friday. Two weeks before Labor Day, the daily average drops to 350 people a day. Then, one week before Labor Day, with more schools starting, the average is 200 people a day.

"The new law certainly would help the Straits area's economy," Mr. Eby said. "It definitely would help give two more great weeks of business. It is such a seasonal thing around here."

If the HB 4083 becomes a law, school districts with collective bargaining agreements requiring classes to begin prior to Labor Day would not be required to make the change until their contract expires. Then the districts, and the unions, would have to comply to the new law.

The bill must now be approved by the Senate before going to Governor Granholm for her signature.

"We're very encouraged the bill will go through the Senate, too," Rep. McDowell said, although he doubts the Senate will bring it up until sometime in September.

Senator Jason Allen could not be reached for comment.



## West Bluff Gets New Stairway

A new stairway for hearty Island explorers connects Lakeshore Drive to the West Bluff with 205 steps and 15 landings, making the stairs the tallest on the Island. The new park addition is a gift from the Richard and Jane Manoogian Foundation. Mr. Manoogian is a Mackinac State Historic Parks Commissioner and the couple enjoys a cottage on the West Bluff. The stairway project is expected to be completed in two to three weeks.



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