

Michigan Politics

By George Weeks



'Staggering Differences' in Drug Prices Says A.G. Cox

Puzzled by how prices vary for gallons of gas depending on what station pumps them? That's nothing compared to huge discrepancies on prescription drugs depending on who peddles them.

Politicians tend to overstate when they announce results of their own efforts and their calls for action by others. But Attorney General Mike Cox seemed on target last week when he:

- Proclaimed that his investigation of drug prices "revealed staggering cost differences between identical prescription drugs across the state, including price differences of more than \$100 within a community for the same dosage of the same drug."

- Called, as he did in releasing survey results a year ago, for the Department of Community Health (DCH) drug-price Web site (www.michigandrugprices.com), which now only provides information for 30 drugs, to list at least 150 as do such states as Minnesota, New York, and New Jersey.

Cox said the DCH site lacks information on drugs used to treat common diseases such as diabetes, osteoporosis, cancer, and Alzheimer's. That's quite an information gap even in the current budget crunch, especially considering that Cox said he would provide funding from a settlement he won.

"It's a tragedy that Michigan does not have a broad-based, user-friendly, interactive drug cost Web site," said Cox, who has been jousting with the Granholm administration on a number of fronts.

Announcing his May 7 to May 11 survey of 200 pharmacies in 10 different communities on 11 commonly prescribed drugs that do not appear on the DCH site, Cox said a consumer in Detroit "could pay as much as \$102 more for the identical prescription drugs only a matter of miles apart, a consumer in Traverse City could pay as much as \$128 more for identical drugs, and a consumer in Lansing could pay as much as \$98.99 more."

While Cox's release did not specifically mention his 20-store Upper Peninsula survey (mostly in the Marquette area), AG spokesman Rusty Hills said there generally was less disparity in prices above than below the bridge.

The mean price of the drugs is slightly lower in the U.P. than in Traverse City on all but one of the 11 drugs surveyed.

Some anomalies in the telephone survey: Cox recorded the Traverse City Kmart price for Plavix at \$30, while 18 other pharmacies in the city were at \$100-plus on the survey day. In the same city, the price for Effexor at four Rite Aid stores was \$138.99, but \$98.99 at its fifth outlet.

While Cox cited differences of \$20 or so on \$170-plus prices of Ambien in Detroit and Traverse City, my neighborhood pharmacist (whose company comes out well on the survey) says Ambien "just went generic."

However pricing is parsed within and among communities, Cox is right in calling for the DCH drug pricing Web site to expand its listing "so that Michigan consumers can spend their healthcare dollars more effectively."

This information can help seniors, the uninsured, the underinsured, and consumers save money immediately. According to states that have broad-based drug cost Web sites, consumers saved an average of \$17.36 per prescription."

Results of the Cox drug survey are available at www.michigan.gov/ag.

Michigan Week
As proclaimed by Governor Jennifer Granholm, this is Michigan Week, which since 1954 has been "a time to embrace, explore, and celebrate everything that sets our state apart as an ideal place to live, work, and raise a family."

One of the aspects of Michigan Week is the Library of Michigan's Notable Books promotion. This year's top 20 abounds with northern Michigan writers and subjects, including books by authors Jim Harrison, Gloria Whelan, and Anne-Marie Oomen.

Subjects include a novel set in Prohibition-era Charlevoix, an exploration of the mystery behind "Michigan's Largest Mass Murder" (a 1913 trampling incident in Calumet), stories about an Ojibway community in northern Michigan, and a political biography about ex-Governor Bill Milliken.

Details are available at www.michigan.gov/notable-books.

George Weeks retired last year after 22 years as political columnist for The Detroit News. His weekly Michigan Politics column is syndicated by Superior Features.

Nextel Tower Approved With Stipulation

By Eric Fish
After weeks of analysis and debate, the Mackinac Island City Council approved the placement of Nextel cellular towers on the Fire Hall in a Wednesday, May 23, meeting, pending a stipulation that would award the city \$2,000 if Nextel removes its equipment prior to the expiration of a five-year contract.

Nextel has agreed to pay the city \$400 a month for the spot.

The Nextel plan, which has been a burning topic in council and committee meetings in past weeks, was negotiated in a Tuesday, May 22, meeting of the Finance Committee.

"I understand the hesitance, and we have seen too many towers going up all over already," Alderman Mike Hart said Wednesday, referring to

modern-day facilities being constructed in the heart of Mackinac Island's historic district. "These folks, I think, are really going to try to go way beyond just trying to accommodate."

The towers will be placed on three corners of the Fire Hall and will be painted white, like the building, to blend.

Nextel signals now are beamed over from a tower in Mackinaw City, and reception downtown and in residential areas is spotty, said Ray Fought, the radio frequency design manager for Sprint/Nextel of Michigan. He presented the Finance Committee with several maps that showed increased signal strength with a tower on Market Street. A repeater at Grand Hotel will expand cover-

age. Still, the idea of another cellular telephone tower on Mackinac Island has been met with skepticism.

"When you come here, we're taking a step back in time to the 1800s," Alderman Dan Wightman said at Tuesday's Finance Committee meeting. "We can't have this place turning into a giant cell tower."

Nextel will begin erecting the towers Memorial Day weekend and expects to have the service up and running within a week. The towers could also be used as an emergency backup system for the community's police and fire departments.

"This will supply a backup system at a very nominal cost to our city," Police Chief

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Catholic Churches Calling for Changes

A new plan that calls for changes in area Catholic churches includes the sharing of pastors and the closing of five churches and some rectories. The plan, called "Of One Heart and Mind," was announced by Bishop Alexander Sample of the Catholic Diocese of Marquette to parishioners at weekend Masses May 19 and May 20.

St. Ignatius Loyola in St. Ignace, Ste. Anne's on Mackinac Island, and Immaculate Conception in Moran will share a pastor, who will be based in St. Ignace. An associate pastor will reside on the Island. Plans call for the rectory, but not the church, in Moran to be sold, since it is no longer needed.

By June 30, 2008, Our Lady of Lourdes in Engadine will close, although the pastor for churches in Naubinway, Curtis, and Germfask will reside at the Engadine rectory. Engadine has the only rectory in the area.

Churches in Hessel, Goetzville, DeTour, and Drummond Island will remain linked, with one pastor at Hessel. The planning committee is suggesting the rectory at Goetzville be sold.

St. Mary in Trout Lake will be open seasonally from May through October. It will be linked with churches in Rudyard and Brimley, with a pastor residing in Rudyard.

The closures will affect approximately 194 families out of 23,703 families across the Upper Peninsula diocese.

The plan is in response to a growth in some churches and a

decline in parish membership and population in others. It will be implemented over the next three years and completed by 2010.

The planning process began in early 2006 to address having fewer pastors to lead parishes and to include the use of more associate pastors. The diocese expects to have six fewer pastors and three fewer priests available for parish ministry by 2010.


Other parishes that are closing beginning as early as October are St. Cecilia in Hubbell, St. Francis Xavier in Sidnaw, and Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in Zeba. St. Catherine in Marenisco will

close when a priest is no longer available to serve the mission.

In the Sault Ste. Marie area, the plan includes a training program for priests in Native American ministry.

The plan was developed by a Diocesan Planning Steering Committee, which was composed of clergy, and religious and lay people from across the diocese.

The plan includes parishes in the Upper Peninsula counties of Luce, Chippewa, Mackinac, Baraga, Houghton, Keweenaw, Menominee, Delta, Schoolcraft, Iron, Dickinson, Gogebic, Ontonagon, Marquette, and Alger.



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