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Beyond Right-to-Work

POLITICAL DIARY

By ALLYSIA FINLEY

Democrats in Lansing don't have enough votes to block right-to-work legislation, but that's not to say they have no leverage. Yesterday they threatened as retribution to torpedo a misconceived subsidy for a new Detroit hockey arena that Republican leaders hope to pass during the lame-duck session. If only all Democratic protest votes were so salutary for taxpayers.

Detroit billionaire Mike Ilitch wants local taxpayers to subsidize a proposed \$650 million arena to house his hockey team, the Detroit Red Wings. Mr. Ilitch, who also owns the Detroit Tigers, Little Caesars Pizza and large stakes in several other downtown developments, has long wanted to move the Red Wings from the aging Joe Louis Arena to a spiffier venue. Republican legislators are primed to make the 83-year-old businessman's dreams come true.

Although most of the arena's details, including its location, remain nebulous, Republican House Speaker Pro Tempore John Walsh has sponsored a bill that would allow the Ilitches to use a city agency's bonding authority to borrow at subsidized rates and to siphon off \$13 million in local tax revenues to repay the debt. Oh, and the arena would also be exempt from property taxes.

Some Republicans in the legislature have balked that the project is merely corporate welfare, and they're right. Besides, taxpayer-subsidized sports stadiums rarely if ever pay for themselves by stimulating economic



activity. As Jarret Skorup of the [Mackinac Center](#) notes, the Detroit Lions' old Silverdome stadium received an \$800,000 subsidy each year from the state, and Pontiac taxpayers were on the hook for \$1.5 million annually for the stadium's upkeep after the Lions moved.

Mr. Walsh needs Democratic votes to pass the bill since several Republicans who had earlier supported the stadium are having second thoughts. He may be out of luck. House Minority Leader Rich Hammel yesterday announced that his entire caucus plans to vote no in protest of the right-to-work legislation. Many Democrats also find it unconscionable to subsidize a billionaire's fancies while the city is flat-out broke.

Thus, Michigan taxpayers may score two major victories this week, both of which were unexpected a month ago.