

Democrats: We had to raise your taxes

They blame former Gov. John Engler for state's revenue crisis

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By **CHARLES CRUMM** of The Oakland Press

Democratic lawmakers are defending their votes earlier this week to raise income taxes and expand the sales tax to resolve a budget deficit they say was largely caused by Republicans.

The income tax, they say, was gradually reduced to 3.9 percent over a period of years while state spending under a Republican Legislature and Republican governor was not.

Currently, Republicans control the Senate, while Democrats control the House and governor's office.

"What it took was a Democratic House and Democratic governor to get something done," Rep. Tim Melton, D-Auburn Hills, said Wednesday.

Rep. David Law, R-Commerce Township, said: "That is absolutely absurd.

"It's the Democratic Party that put a gun to the taxpayers' head in a dark alley and held them up. It's the Democratic Party that increased taxes by \$2 billion to pay for all programs they want to implement," he said in a phone interview.

Melton, along with Reps. Marie Donigan, D-Royal Oak; Aldo Vagnozzi, D-Farmington Hills; and Paul Condino, D-Southfield, picked a fire station in Pontiac to accent their claims that the budget deal reached Monday protects revenue sharing that supports the city's police and fire operations and shores up funding for schools.

They were joined in a morning news conference by area school superintendents and Pontiac clergy.

Conservative Republicans have said they'll support recall elections against lawmakers - mostly Democrats - who voted for the tax increases, the largest since the 1980s.

Lawmakers have until the end of the month to work out the details of the overall spending plan they agreed to Monday.

That deal raises the income tax from 3.9 percent to 4.35 percent and expands the state's 6 cents-per-dollar sales tax to services that were previously not taxed.

Part of the agreement is to find \$440 million in savings through spending changes and cuts.

"The devil's in the details," said Condino.

Democrats said much of the blame for the current crisis lies with former Republican Gov. John Engler.

"One of the key features is it sets aside money for the rainy day fund," Vagnozzi said of the budget deal. "That fund used to be \$1.5 billion. Gov. Engler drained it completely."

Condino said steep cuts Republicans were calling for would have hurt local services and schools.

"Cutting police and fire and not getting revenue to schools was not acceptable," Condino said. "That was not an option to us."

Donigan said in her district, Royal Oak and Madison Heights have lost \$11 million in revenue sharing money over the years because the "Legislature couldn't act as promised."

Royal Oak Schools Superintendent Thomas Moline noted that Democratic lawmakers, when listed, have a "D" following their names to denote their party affiliation.

He suggested Democrats change that to an "R" for responsible.

"Finally, we have a responsible Legislature," Moline said.