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Drain Strain

State needs more than a quick fix on code

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In a perfect world, Michigan would replace its county drain commissioners with watershed managers who have to take responsibility for downstream impacts of their upstream decisions. Failing that level of reform, changes in the state's eye-glazing drain code become little more than window dressing -- and, in the version facing the state Senate, may actually cause more environmental mayhem.

The drain code deserves better than a last mad dash through the post-election session of the Legislature. Originally designed mostly to ensure that farmers could de-swamp their fields, the code now has far more applications for the kind of de-swamping that benefits housing projects, malls and other purveyors of pavement over the absorbent country. Water quality -- not just moving water along -- has to be the state's primary goal from here on out.

The code rewrite also opens the door for pushing costs back on taxpayers that developers and their clients should assume. Drain commissioners, almost alone among government officials these days, retain power to decide the scope of a project and bill landowners for it without seeking voter approval and with few provisions even for public input or environmental review.

It's a lousy way to make decisions that affect every wetland, stream, lake, river and Great Lake that Michigan holds in stewardship. Lawmakers -- especially state senators, who have two more years left in their terms -- can afford to take the time to look into watershed management first and then tailor the drain code to higher principles.

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