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Matt Smith: Playing round-robin in Lansing

Time for a pop quiz, taxpayers. Put yourself in a lawmaker's loafers and consider the following.

Michigan's jobless rate — 6.6 percent in November — is so high that it's pulling up the national average to 5 percent. That trend has persisted for months.



The state's manufacturing sector, which has been the state's economic engine for years, is running on fumes.

Meanwhile, the state is experiencing a brain drain because young people are leaving the state to pursue careers that are not tied up in nuts and bolts.

As a result, the budget ax has been retired in favor of the budget guillotine. There isn't enough tax revenue available to pay for state programs and services, including building new roads and raising the bar for education funding.

That said, what would you consider an appropriate response?

- Propose legislation that would name a new state bird.

- Focus on more proposals to create next-generation jobs that will lure young people to the state and keep them for years to come.

- Attempt to offer tax incentives or other daring measures to revitalize the manufacturing sector.

If, like me, you're a zany idealist, you might have suggested one of the first two options. If you're an actual lawmaker, on the other hand, it's entirely possible that you picked the third.

According to a recent article from The Associated Press, there's a move under way in Lansing to knock the robin off its perch as Michigan's state bird, a post it's held since 1931. Among the possible replacements are the Kirtland's warbler, which breeds in northern Michigan; and the black-capped chickadee, which you can see around most of the state.

Some supporters of the movement told the AP that it's a time for a unique state bird because other states (Connecticut and Wisconsin) claim the robin as their own symbol. There's also some chatter indicating that the resolution that made the robin Michigan's state bird has expired.

Wow. I'm stunned that our lawmakers have time to focus on the fine print of a decades-old resolution while the headlines about job losses and other economic woes are staring them right in the face. The vultures are circling, and apparently some people think the matter of the state bird has to be addressed right now.

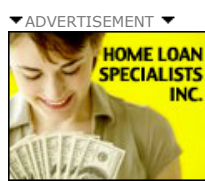
Even if you're not a robin lover, this proposal ought to ruffle your feathers. This is an idea that sounds like it came straight out of Wild Turkey — the booze, not the bird. Our lawmakers ought not to have time to care about the state bird when there are serious matters that deserve prompt attention.

If you believe that few rogue lawmakers wasting time on such trivial nonsense doesn't affect your lifestyle in Livingston County, think again.

Brighton Area Schools cut bus service to the high school in the spring because of a lack of state funding. The Brighton district has lingered at or near the bottom of the funding scale ever since Proposal A shifted the source of education funding from property taxes to the state sales tax.

The Brighton school board restored bus service after it caught an earful from parents, but not without pointing out that high school busing and more would probably be on the chopping block during the next round of budget talks.

Meanwhile, the Michigan Department of Transportation operates under a "preserve first" policy that focuses on maintaining existing roadways at the expense of upgrading roads in growing areas, such as Livingston County.



Good thing that dentists don't follow that logic. If that were the case, we'd still have baby teeth rooted in our heads.

Nevertheless, the policy is often cited as the reason the proposed interchange at Interstate 96 and Latson Road never gets built while Detroit keeps getting ... road dollars. You're bound to hear it, too, when officials start pressing for another lane of travel on U.S. 23 between Ann Arbor and Brighton.

All that said, I don't think a measure to name a new state bird deserves consideration when Lansing struggles to pay for education and fix the roads. That's not to mention how it acts powerless as young wage earners are flying the coop and the state economy is laying an egg, month after month.

If the Legislature, on the other hand, ever comes calling for an official bird of its own, here's what I'd be pulling for: the ostrich. Sound flaky? Not really. The bird and our lawmakers have something in common.

In times of trouble, some of them are rumored to stick their head in the sand and act like nothing is wrong.


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