

Opinion

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O&E Thursday, February 21, 1991

Silent Fred A mighty fortress is our judge

SOME POLITICIANS are great wall-builders. And it seems that the more exalted their office, the higher and thicker is the wall they build between themselves and the public.

Oh sure, it's glad hands and back slaps and luncheon talks ad nauseam during the political campaign. But then they're elected (or returned) to office and up goes that wall... complete with barbed wire and broken glass on top.

Local judges are politicians. They also build walls. Unfortunately, we think we see one going up around Fred Harris over at the 47th District Court in Farmington these days.

Now, we endorsed Judge Harris, an incumbent by Gov. James Blanchard's appointment, over a most worthy opponent in the general election in November. His experience led us to believe that he was the best man for this important local office.

Many felt that Harris could be arrogant, unwilling to discuss controversial matters and downright unapproachable. But few spoke ill of his judicial decisions, and he seemed to run an honest and efficient court.

BUT ABOUT HIS wall... in our opinion, it's been going up stone by stone since the Farmington-area voters gave him the nod over grass-roots-guy Rick Krauer for a six-year term on the bench in the Nov. 6 election.

Yes, the election's over. Send away the campaign workers and bring on the stonemasons.

Harris last week found himself in the center of a controversy of sorts over the \$1 million bond he set that's keeping a 20-year-old self-confessed gun buff in jail.

Brian Oscar Lang's parents' house in the Franklin Knolls subdivision of Farmington Hills was raided by the feds and the local cops Feb. 11. Firearms, military weapons and detonating devices were seized in the raid.

Send away the campaign workers and bring on the stonemasons.

After the raid, there was a lot of talk — especially by the talking heads on TV news — about terrorism. That's understandable, perhaps, given the tenor of the times.

Lang, however, has not been charged with any firearms offenses. Instead, he faces a felony charge of receiving and concealing stolen property. So why the high bond?

NOW PLEASE understand, we're not being critical of Harris' bond for Lang for the concealing and receiving charge, even though it did raise a few eyebrows in legal circles around town. He did what he thought was right.

However, we are taking him to task for refusing once again to communicate with us about something he's done in the course of his job. Once again, he refused to return numerous phone calls from Observer reporters.

The public, we think, really needed to know the judge's thinking on this important matter. If Harris thought the law prohibited him from discussing the matter, he should have said so.

The Lang case was one incident with silent Fred Harris. There have been others. The judge needs to communicate with his public, and he can start by returning phone calls to our reporters.

Different judges build different walls. A Supreme Court justice constructs an impenetrable fortress worthy of Saddam Hussein. A federal judge might have a castle with a shark-filled moat around.

But a district judge is truly a jurist of the people. If he has a wall at all, it should be a freshly painted picket fence complete with working gates. And he should be willing to chat with folks who drop by.

Licked again Postal service is stomping us

PLAY POST office with the government and you're going to get kicked in the teeth, not kissed on the lips.

That's what a lot of us are thinking now that this public monopoly known as the United States Postal Service is socking us a whopping 29 cents for a first-class stamp.

Economists tell us that times are tough. We're asked to start biting bullets and tightening belts (if we have them). Businesses everywhere are cutting back, laying off, doing whatever it takes to survive in lean times.

Ah, but our postal service... now there's a sunny spot on a bleak economic horizon. When the going gets tough, it simply raises its rates.

Twice guarded as it is by the full weight and power of the federal government and the tough unions that protect the workers, the postal service does pretty much as it pleases.

IF WE, THE captive consumers, don't happen to like it... well, we can just fold our mail into paper airplanes and launch them into that never-

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ending stream of hot air supplied by the postal service's board of governors.

And then, to add its insult to our injury, the postal service now seems to have this inexplicable shortage of 1-cent stamps for those of us who got caught with rolls and sheets of the 25-centers.

Yes, as rate hikes go, this was a quickie, wasn't it? Apparently, it even caught the post office by surprise.

Could a truly privatized postal system, free from government hoodluggies and 18th century thinking, do any better? Come on now. Could it possibly do worse?

Frigid outlook Don't panic over slow economy

A SHOPPING TRIP last week, looking for refrigerators at the chain appliance stores, demonstrated that those are exactly the kind of big-ticket purchases people tend to put off when times are bad.

And times are bad. If traffic among the Whirlpools and Amana Radar Ranges is any barometer, customers were nearly non-existent. Sales people walked in circles, approaching a potential customer hopefully.

But many bleak economic predictions could well southeastern Michigan into a recessionary time warp, circa 1980-83. Last winter's economic slowdown, which begat this winter's recession, doesn't necessarily equal next winter's depression though.

Here's the point. A fragile economy can and often does take a rapid plunge when stubborn, or worse yet, panicky consumers enter the picture. For people with discretionary income — and reasonable job security — our advice is to go ahead and spend it.

Go out to eat. Go to the movies. Take a vacation. Buy a refrigerator, or even a new car if it's

really needed. Not only will it boost the economy, it'll prop up the public mood as well.

THERE'S NO need to return to the conspicuous consuming suburban America of the decadent '80s. The days when there was a pot of gold buried on every stove and a gas guzzler in every garage are definitely gone and probably best forgotten. Today's consumer should be in for a leaner, meaner, more ecologically correct kind of consumption.

Life after all does go on. A spokeswoman for Southfield's Providence Hospital told us Monday there have been 1,000 births on the hospital's maternity ward since early December when President Bush publicly used the "R" word for the first time in since Jan. 15 when we've all been using the "W" word.

Yes, there's a war on. But that doesn't necessarily mean economic doom. Check the history books.

Besides, the last thing needed in these desperate times is more appliance salespeople out of work.



Engler must educate our current workers

THE WAY I see it, Gov. John Engler's State of the State speech last week had one hit, one passed ball and one wild pitch.

The hit was his emphasis on education.

Calling it his "one absolute spending priority," Engler wants to make this generation of Michigan children the "best educated in our state's history." And he drew the connection between well-educated children and jobs, "good jobs, secure jobs — right here at home."

Nobody doubts the linkage. Despite the well-publicized warning 15 years ago of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools, America continues to fall behind our international competitors in educating our kids.

This is double true in Michigan, where our manufacturing base and tradition of high wages require our workers to be highly productive.

We have dilly-dallied far too long in Michigan about improving our schools.

IMPROVEMENT WON'T come overnight. And that's where the passed ball comes in.

Engler seems to assume the only solution to our non-competitive labor force is in the schools. It isn't. Consider the people working today whose skills are already low. They are unproductive and at grave risk of being displaced from their jobs.

Some estimate that one worker in four is functionally illiterate. Others show that fully half our manufacturing workers are behind their peers in Japan or Germany in their work-re-

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Philip Power

the controversial proposal to cut school property taxes by 20 percent.

Engler called it a "job creation tax," arguing that Michigan's property tax burden is among the highest in the nation, a barrier to economic growth and new business formation.

While it certainly is true that we rely far more on the property tax than we should and that high property taxes are one element that discourages economic growth, it by no means follows that cutting property taxes alone will stimulate growth. George Bush called that idea "voodoo economics" when he was a candidate in 1980.

Senate majority leader Richard Posthumus says Engler's proposals will work in Michigan "much the same way that Reaganomics provided a great economic boon in the 1980s in the nation." If that's so, take cover.

And to trade off important investments in our competitive skills job training programs, for example — against reduced property taxes seems dubious public policy at best.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His award-winning column will appear periodically.

Among the celebrated budget cuts proposed by Engler are virtually the entire state system of job training, ranked as among the best in the nation. On his cutting board are the Opportunity Card project, the Michigan Training Incentive Fund and the entire Michigan Youth Corps.

Of the original \$36 million for "employment training" and "job training services" in the Labor Department's budget, the Engler administration proposes to cut \$31 million. That 85 percent slash is aimed directly at investments in the skills and productivity of Michigan's working people.

THE WILD PITCH has to do with

from our readers

Children will suffer

To the editor: The result of the Feb. 5 millage election leaves me with an unsettled feeling.

I am sympathetic to those citizens who truly cannot afford a tax increase at this time. I understand their reasons better than I do those who voted against the millage because of the extensive negative campaign that Richard Headlee waged and the unlimited financial resources of the Alexander Hamilton Life.

As a taxpayer in this community, I resent the efforts of a private company exerting that kind of influence on a community especially when the facts were distorted as they were on this issue.

As an educator, my time ought to be spent working with the children and not having to spend time combating an organized campaign to justify the need to support education.

It is illogical for me to think that in this day and age, when so much emphasis is placed on our educational system, that the one way to remedy

the situation is to cut the money. That doesn't make sense.

ANOTHER THING that doesn't make sense is the perception that our district did not need the money to replace what the state took away. Our district, and particularly the children, will suffer for what our state government has been unable to resolve.

Indeed, the people have spoken. But I wonder if we as parents and supporters of quality education can ever have a chance at turning things around when approximately 22 percent of our population have children in school.

That is a frightening thought when you think of what the impact can be when a company like Alexander Hamilton and Headlee mobilize their resources.

Now our district must make deep cuts to offset the loss of revenue and remember, the district was not asking for new money, only money to replace what the state took.

In some ways maybe the defeat brought our schools closer together. In any event, I know there were a lot of people who worked very hard at trying to communicate accurate information and encourage support.

Your efforts were tremendous and I for one, extend thanks.

Michael L. Duff, principal, GIB Elementary School

Greed is basis for land deal

To the editor:

I want to express my deep disappointment in the integrity of the "educational" community of Cranbrook as you prepare to betray the stewardship entrusted to that group by the donor of the Cranbrook Nature Sanctuary property.

Mr. Ward's conveyance of this important piece of our limited natural areas to your care was in the belief and spirit of your guardianship. Destruction of the land and its life-forms in order to "develop" it is not consistent with guardianship, but with greed.

Surely some other form of fundraising could serve to finance improvement of the Science Institute.

Patricia Evans, Dearborn Heights

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