

points of view

Polls offer sense of community

I WENT TO VOTE TUESDAY, as always. But for the first time, I didn't.

It seems that living in Republican West Bloomfield and being forced to vote for a Republican to have any effect on local, county or state politics finally did me in.



Judith Doner Berne

As I had feared two years ago I registered as a Republican — even though I am a Democrat — and so I couldn't vote in the Democratic presidential primary. And, of course, no way would I vote for anyone on the Republican roster — although as a colleague later pointed out, I could have checked the uncommitted box.

Basically, I was disenfranchised.

That's too bad. The Democrats need all the votes they can get — especially in Oakland County. They need all the help they can get, period. Although George Bush is beatable, it is unlikely that any of the candidates on the Democratic ballot Tuesday can do it — even the box I would have X'd — Paul Tsongas.

NO, I DIDN'T VOTE but I did

come away with something — the sense of community I always feel when I go to the polls. It's a sense of community that comes from exercising your rights for 20 years at the same precinct, located at the neighborhood school only a short walk from your house.

I was bound to meet and greet someone I knew, in addition to the election workers, some of whom have been handing out ballots for many years.

This go round, it was a West Bloomfield teacher who had taught at least two of our children high school English. She asked details on them and I got to meet her newest husband.

Then our new next-door neighbor from out-of-state showed up. It was

just her second time voting as a Michigander.

Many people don't experience that sense of community — because they don't vote. They don't vote because they feel disgruntled with the system, because they feel intimidated, or because they simply don't care.

Many of these are young people, for whom the right to vote has never become a rite.

THAT'S WHY the two dozen Southfield high school students who for the first time joined the brigade of paid precinct workers were cast an important opportunity — an opportunity to be part of the system which should be mimicked by each of our communities.

It happened because Southfield fell about 25 people short of the 200 workers needed to run the precincts. It seemed some of the regular senior adult election workers hadn't returned from spending the winter in warmer climes.

Southfield city clerk Mary Bonner came up with the idea of having 18-year-old students take their place and both high school principals sig-

nalled thumbs up. The students attended a city hall training session, were excused from school Tuesday and earned \$70 for the day.

Southfield High principal Ken Wilson saw the chance to give these first-time voters both a hands-on educational experience and that sense of community. "It gives our youngsters a chance to directly participate in the process and learn more than studying a book in the classroom. It's also a chance to bridge the gap between the younger and older community."

"This is pretty exciting for us," confirmed Marjorie White, from Southfield-Lathrup High. "This is our very first election, and it's a chance to find out more about it."

For future elections, all communities should designate a certain percentage of precinct worker spots for these young voters. As Southfield has proved, it doesn't take a major study. Just do it.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer & Eccentric. She is a columnist.

Phase in a fuel tax, says commissioner

IRVING RUBIN is a name I hadn't heard in a long time until he appeared in 1991 on Gov. John Engler's list for the state Transportation Commission.

In the '60s, Rubin was great news copy as head of the Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS), forerunner of SEMCOG.

He's retired from Ford Motor Co. now. Engler needed a bipartisan Transportation Commission and tapped Democrat Rubin of Bloomfield Hills.

Rubin was white-haired, candid and outspoken in his TALUS days. He hasn't changed a bit, bless him.

Last month the Transportation Commission took up a resolution to support Engler's plans to fix roads with a bond issue and no fuel tax hike. One voice dissented. Guess who.

"I HAVE NO philosophical problem with the sale of bonds," said Rubin. "what circumstances are appropriate." Michigan borrowed in the '50s to speed up the fledgling

state freeway program. But times are different. Uncle Sam will boost Michigan's annual allocation of \$300 million to more than \$500 million — that is, "if state and local road agencies can find the 20 percent matching dollars that the federal program requires," says the Michigan Municipal League.

The bond issue would give "not one red cent for municipalities and counties," said Rubin.

Around here, county roads, in particular, are an embarrassment. Existing taxes could retire the bonds, but \$200 million would be interest payments to bankers. Myself, I'd rather see lenders making new business and home mortgage investments.

OH, THERE ARE a few things for the locals in the Engler package. One involves using Mackinac Straits Bridge tolls for the critical bridge program.

But this once-a-year Mackinac Bridge user can't see the connection between a straits bridge toll and local bridges.

Rubin said Engler correctly wants to eliminate something called the "evaporation allowance"



Tim Richard

by changing the point of fuel tax collection from the distributor to the refinery — "eliminates cheating," Rubin said. And that's good.

"BUT IT'S simpler and cleaner to raise the fuel tax," Rubin argued. "Six cents would be enough to match all the federal aid and help the cities and counties."

"Now is not the time," said Engler.

Nor will House Speaker Lew Dodak, a Democrat, advocate a much-needed fuel tax hike. Dodak wants Engler and the Republican Senate to lead, and then maybe he'll follow.

So this fuel tax idea isn't partisan. And if the recession bothers you, said Rubin, bend the first year and pass a fuel tax the second.

TRY AS I might, I can't see Engler's problem with hiking the fuel tax.

Prices are below \$1 a gallon for the first time since Engler was an obscure back-bencher in the House and 16 cents lower than a year ago. We'd hardly notice it, particularly if it were phased in over two or three years.

"Competitive" is Engler's favorite word. OK, Michigan's fuel tax is 15 cents, same as Indiana and Kentucky. The national average is 16.1 cents. Ohio charges 20 cents. Illinois 19. Wisconsin 21. Iowa 20. Tennessee (home of the Saturn plant) 20.

Because of efficient vehicles, Rubin said, fuel revenues are "flat at best, and probably declining" even though we're driving more miles. I checked. From 1989 to the '92 budget, total motor fuel taxes slipped 1.17 percent. Ol' Irv was right.

Never known as a flaming party man, Rubin had some good political advice for Engler and the Legislature.

"Good roads are good politics."

Respect lacking for blacks

MY WORK BUDDY, Barry, came bounding into my office one day last week, clutching a copy of the Eccentric. He was all excited — agitated. He could see his jaw muscle working in the side of his face as he wailed for me to hang up the phone.

As I turned to greet him with a "Good-morning-how's-business," he blurted out, "I have to talk to you about your column," pointing to the newspaper he held.

"I mean, you write some good stuff and make me think about things the way I normally wouldn't, but, I mean, why do you have to put that line at the bottom about one black man's opinion? Why do you have to call attention to your race? Why can't you just be a man with an opinion, why do you have to be a black man?"

Well, after my mouth had closed, after five seconds of astonishment at his absurd, all kinds of impulses came to mind. Defend my position, explain the point of the statement again (as I had done in my inaugural column), drop the phrase because I

felt were causing people to turn off, then maybe I wasn't worth it; get angry at his attack. But then as his words penetrated the fog of my defense mechanism, I realized that he was still speaking, and I tuned back in.

"YOU KNOW, Jeff," he said, "I don't look at you as a black man, I mean, I respect you. I know you and I know you're not a racist. But when you put 'black man' at the end of your column, when you bring race into what otherwise are good ideas, you sound like you have a chip on your shoulder. You sound like a racist!"

I nodded my head in acknowledgment of his position. My mind would not, disengage from from Barry's comments.

One in particular stood out, glared out actually, almost as if it were highlighted with a bright red border: "I don't look at you as a black man, I mean, I respect you."

Respect. Perhaps the most critical



Jeffrey Miller

ingredient in the mix of a satisfying life for all adults is largely lacking in the life of most black Americans.

The stereotypical responses of most of America toward African-Americans in this culture, are not compatible with the notion of respect. Welfare cheats, drug addicts, undereducated, ghetto dwellers, lazy, shiftless, illiterate, violent, oversexed baby makers. These images perpetuated in virtually all media do not engender respectful attitudes.

What Barry was really saying to me was that I don't fit the stereotype of "Black Man," and by identifying myself that way, I somehow had diminished the value of my commentary.


THE TRAGEDY that is the ultimate

outcome of this type of thought process is already occurring in our nation. A generation of young, black Americans finds little to respect in its own culture and looks to Africa for its historic roots.

A generation of young, white Americans has bought the affirmative action myth that blacks with responsible careers achieved that success due to some sort of quota.

As a black person in our melting pot culture, respect is given to athletes and entertainers. Perform for the greater enjoyment, and honors and cash are freely given. But if you are an average looking, sounding, acting African-American, your contribution, your motivation is suspect.

My work buddy, Barry, means well. He's a nice guy and I like him; I don't look at him as a white man, just a man. But it's different for the Barrys of this world. Disrespect is not a birthright as it is for those born with black skin, and until that changes, I'm gonna keep signing off my column with this: This is just one black man's opinion. What's yours?



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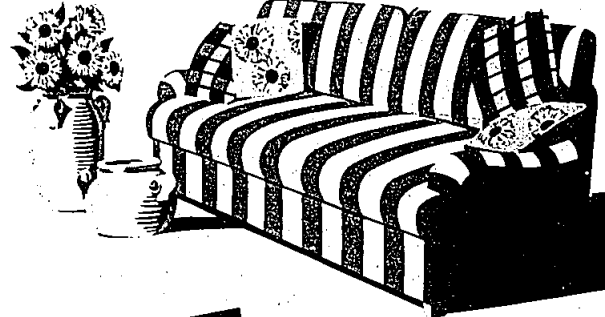
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