

Students learn government the hard way

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Jefferson would have been proud. Confronted with a complaint from an irate elderly resident about the glare of parking lights, the Farmington City Council had a solution.

Have the city manager meet with the man one-on-one and soothe him in his discontent.

Councilman for a day David Clinard came up with the idea, taking a page from the textbook of unconventional approaches to city politics. Even Shirley Richardson, William Hartsock and Jo Anne McShane, who know a thing or two about city council proceedings, had to smile at that one.

Seniors from Farmington High took part in the eighth annual Student Government Day April 27 in Farmington.

"It gives them a more personal view of government," said Farmington High teacher Kevin Kansman. "It makes them aware of the issues and responsibility these people are involved with."

"I think most students weren't aware of the scope of local government."

Students were paired off with city officials, including city manager Frank Lauhoff, assessor John Saller and public safety director Gary Goss in order to see the inner workings of government.

Seniors petitioned in the classroom for the positions in which they were interested.

Kim Seed, a senior at Farmington High, was director of public safety for the day. She made a trip to the firing range and learned about the variety of issues facing public safety departments.

"I always thought it (police work) meant being out on the street," said Seed, who wants to



On tape: Cable production specialist Todd Whitman (left) assists in videotaping temporary council members. Students Norm Ackroyd (center) and Dan Baranyai work the equipment.



STAFF PHOTOS BY SHARON LEHMAN

major in law or accounting at the University of Michigan next fall. "There's a lot of training involved."

Later, Seed gave a public safety report as seniors conducted their own council session.

On the agenda were reports from city manager Raffi Bogosian on inline skating and skateboarding and the effects of removing parking from Grand River east of Farmington Road.

Reports also came from the administrative assistant, city clerk, city treasurer, director of public safety and director of public services. In many ways, it was a typical council meeting.

The parking issue on Grand River was tabled for further discussion. A proposed area for inline skating and skateboarding wasn't feasible because of a lack of money.

Welcome to city government.



Playing the role: Above, acting as deputy city clerk, Michele Deering swears in councilman (and fellow student) Dave Clinard. At left, Mayor Kathi Bache (center) sits between Michele Deering (left) and Laura Cunningham as a council issue is discussed.

Spending plan leaves senior issue unsettled

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

The Farmington Hills city budget proposal addresses possible shortfalls that could occur if Proposal A passes.

The proposed budget also addresses the city's new park developments, and it keeps the tax rate at less than 9 mills, one of the lowest in Oakland County.

But some people are concerned that it doesn't do enough to ensure the future of the city's senior center and its programs.

"I think the idea of the .6-mill fund was to ensure the future of the senior program," said Jerry Ellis, a member of the city's parks and recreation committee. "That was supposed to be primarily for a facility. We should be financing the program out of the general budget."

Ellis was not alone in his concern that the city is spending part of the money from the special eight-year levy to pay for programs, rather than buy or build a new facility.

Councilman Terry Sever said that because \$251,000 was being spent on "short-term rent" and \$259,000 was going for expanding of staff and programs, there was no option under the proposed budget to buy or build a senior center.

But if the city were to use more

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*Jerry Ellis
parks and recreation committee*

money to buy bonds to buy or build a new center and expand programs, it would likely cut into other recreation programs, he said.

"I don't know that you could count on the support of the people who used baseball fields and soccer fields who helped pass this millage in the future if you did that," Sever said.

With low interest rates, Sever argued that the city could borrow against future revenues and build or buy a new facility and use more volunteers or general funds to expand the senior program.

But city councilman Aldo Vagnozzi said the special tax was intended for programs, not a new facility.

"This was never intended to build a new facility," Vagnozzi said.

The city signed a new two-year lease for the Mercy Center with the Sisters of Mercy in March but several council members had

originally hoped either to buy the facility or build a new one.

The issue came up at a special study session with the city council and parks and recreation commission Monday night.

Costick, who presented a "very lean" \$52-million budget for council discussion, said it represented only a 5-percent increase from last year's budget and only a 2.1-percent increase over the last three years.

The budget included two new police sergeants, one full-time EMS position, and two added full-time firefighters. But those items could be cut if Proposal A passes, which would cost the city about \$360,000, Costick said.

Another big chunk of budget money will go toward park land purchases and development.

The city will have two more budget sessions this month and will schedule a public hearing in June before adopting the new budget. Costick said the outcome of the state election can then be factored into the budget.

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That would affect an older community like Farmington, where there's little new construction.

This year, the average assessment increase was 9 percent in Farmington, though some areas experienced a 15-percent rise in property values. Farmington Hills' average assessment increase was 5 percent.

Those properties on which assessments rose more than 3 percent this year would see those increases reduced.

City assessor Dean Babb estimates there will be overall a \$35-million reduction in state equal-

ized value (SEV) on property in Farmington Hills.

Cities may get nicked in other ways.

For one, lower tax bills means a loss in tax administration fees.

Farmington, for example, figures to lose \$15,000 to \$16,000 in money used to pay for billing and assessment appeals. Farmington Hills doesn't have a 1-percent administration fee on tax bills.

Another possible cut in funding could result in how state revenue sharing will be affected by Proposal A.

The uncertainty has caused some cities to make two budgets,

according to Osborn. Farmington and Farmington Hills are taking a wait-and-see approach.

"My basic approach to council is, 'Here is the budget. Keep in mind of these potential cuts,'" said Farmington Hills city manager Bill Costick. "One of the challenges in preparing the budget is finding a way to meet that."

Costick is optimistic, though. He added tax reform is needed.

"It hasn't been frustrating to me because we know what the proposal is about," Costick said. "It's a greater frustration when we're dealing with a new legislative proposal every week."

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