

POINTS OF VIEW

Ideas rain for Northland area's renaissance

I wonder what James Mitchell, Alma Turner, Pat Averbuch, Seu Y Liyu and Barry Whitfield thought when they heard last week's announcement that Hudson's will spend major money to renovate its Northland store (as well as stores at Southland, Eastland and Westland) by next fall.

They chose to brainstorm about the lack of a downtown area in Southfield at a recent multicultural community forum focusing on solutions to problems in the Southfield/Lathrup community.

Perhaps they thought, as I did, that Hudson's officials overheard our discussion, which centered on the Northland area that is the cornerstone of Southfield's official Downtown Development District.

Well, no, we didn't say that Hudson's should move its linens from the fourth floor to the ground floor and ex-

pand it menswear, women's shoes, accessories and cosmetics.

Neither did we say that a candy store should go on the second floor at a mall entrance, that a cosmetics line for black people should get its own fancy sales counter or that a new special events auditorium should be added on the fourth floor.

But all those improvements to what has been Hudson's flagship store since the downtown Hudson's closed certainly fit in nicely with our ideas on ways to draw people of all ages and backgrounds to the Northland area.

Out of our brainstorming came these suggestions: a safe environment; fine restaurant; year-round, changing events for young people, such as the Pinnocchio holiday exhibit that drew thousands last year and will be repeated this year; a major children's play area where young parents can take a shopping break while their children run around; a more extensive food



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court; a monthly teen night with special events designed just for them.

We envisioned the ever-vacant old Stouffers building (the former Northland Inn) as a perfect spot to offer governmental services, such as a secretary of state's office and a south-end version of the most-used services of Oakland County. (Is it really true that the drive to the Pontiac county offices to apply and then obtain a marriage license from communities such as

Southfield and Farmington lasts longer than some marriages?)

And we know that Oakland University is considering branching out — so why not an extension in that vacant building? They would join Oakland Community College, which already has a Northland campus.

We noted with satisfaction that the Millennium Theatre Center, formerly the old Northland Theatre, is opening Wednesday with the world premiere of "Life is a Beach," bringing a needed cultural facet to the area.

So, let's see, we mused, what's missing? How about a sense of history.

The renovation of Hudson's coincides with the 40th anniversary of the opening of Hudson's Northland — and of Northland itself — the nation's first suburban shopping mall.

So why should Northland be just another compass direction plus "land" — like Westland, Eastland and Southland — when it has such a history?

Our brainstormers propose it be renamed — the First Mall of America. We'd rather have it be in the same ballpark with the largest mall in the world — the Mall of America outside Minneapolis.

And top it off with a mall museum with replicas of famous malls all over the world, and explanations of their architecture, impact and success.

Outlandish? Impossible? Remember the rules of brainstorming — the unrestrained offering of ideas by all members of a group to seek solutions to problems.

If you'd like to add your ideas, please mail them to me, in care of the Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham 48009. They will be forwarded to the Southfield/Lathrup Multicultural Coalition.

Judith Doner Berne is managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. You can reach her at 901-2563.

Quality districts don't need charter schools

QUESTION: Charter Schools are being touted as one answer for the problems of education. How are they structured and how successful have they been? What advantage do they have over our present system?

ANSWER: The first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in September 1992 (called the City Academy) for 35 inner-city high school "drop-outs." The program was very successful. Some politicians around the country are using this very successful model as the trumpet to demonstrate how well charter schools do and how poor public education is.

Oh, by the way . . . there were four full-time teachers, one teacher aide, volunteer parents, a full-time clerical aide and a part-time psychologist for 35 students in the St. Paul, Minn. Charter School. Lets see now . . . that's a class size of about 8.5 students per teacher with a psychologist, clerical and volunteer support. Not bad!

We've got class sizes of over 35 kids in many of this newspaper's readership area. Give me a school district with a class size of 8-1 and I'll come out of retirement.

'At risk' kids

Most of the charter schools, to this point, have focused on "at risk" kids, often inner-city children who desperately need a highly intensified program with support services. All charter schools seem to have a specific focus. In Minnesota, the birth place of the concept, there are, to name a few, the Metro Deaf School, the New Heights "at risk student" program, in which teachers are paid on a merit system (no contract).

The first question I have is do quality, high performing school districts really need to break off into a charter system? Many are doing fine, thank you. The focus in regard to charter schools, with its built-in accountability factor (perform or we take the money away from you), seems to have initially been on those districts which have a multitude of racial, violent, social, emotional and learning problems.

Wayne State University has a charter school which, I must say, is a plus for Michigan. Operating through a nationally known quality university with a fine education department is a plus. But if a local school district goes for



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a charter school and their classrooms are filled to capacity, who is going to pay the rent for an ancillary building . . . for bringing it up to code . . . for refurbishing. Districts can't offer much, if money has to be used for buildings, money local school districts get from bond issues. Does the local district have to go back to the voters?

Wayne State University or a local school district, running a program is fine, but opening up charter schools to the private sector for entrepreneurs to run could take some watching.

Charter school seams
Back in the Kennedy/Johnson era,

huge federal grants were given to private sector "people" who guaranteed they would raise children's test scores. It was called Performance Contracting. They came into the school, and supposedly would train teachers into performing miracles with children, i.e. raise test scores by up to 40 percentile points within a school year. The seams that came out of that private sector fiasco in money that went directly into their pockets and not into educational programming were legend.

There are many questions!
In some states, charter schools can reject and send back those students who do not behave. We are now talking about a private school funded by the state. And guess which school, in this case, will have the higher test scores?

Certification

Will non-certified teachers, such as an auto engineer (out of work because he couldn't take the pay cut), turn a high school math program around? Possibly. But because some engineer can design a headlight doesn't make him or her a quality teacher. Teaching is still an art.

Will the private sector run schools more business-like? Sometimes business decisions are not the best decisions for children. Schools aren't driven by a profit motive by the very fact some children require more, such as special education, etc.

Every choice option, every gimmick I've seen over the years, that tries to repair education without addressing the core problems, which are societal, has failed. Adding a few charter schools is not going to do it.

But let's give it a try, recognizing that 20 plus or minus charter schools in Michigan are not going to save education. And let's be honest. All these latter day salvation-of-education concepts have, besides hoping to improve education, one major purpose . . . neutralize, right or wrong, the power base of the Michigan Education Association and the National Education Association.

James "Doc" Doyle, a former teacher/school administrator/university instructor, is president of Doyle and Associates, an educational consulting firm.

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