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Pardon Our Phones

The Observer Newspapers apologizes for any inconvenience our advertisers, readers and carrier force may have experienced in calling our Livonia office late last week. A new telephone system has been installed and like most new technology the "bugs" are still being worked out. We regret any delays this may have caused in connecting with our customers. We are improving our phone system to meet our company's needs into and beyond 2000. We appreciate your understanding and patience.

Sincerely,
Susan Rosiek
Susan Rosiek,
Publisher
Observer Newspapers

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Utility tax break prompts Hills ire



Farmington Hills officials aren't too happy with a proposal to give utility companies a tax break on personal property that could cost the city more than \$117,000 every year.

BY JONI HUBRED
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Farmington Hills has joined Oakland County and other metro communities in a battle against a taxing change that could cost the city more than \$117,000 every year.

Statewide, a \$3 billion reduction in

the taxable value of utility companies' personal property would save firms like Detroit Edison, Consumers Energy and MichCon as much as \$200 million and cost local governments that much in tax revenues. What's more, losses could skyrocket if the rates become retroactive, according to City Assessor Dean Babb.

"There have been three years of appeals," Babb said. "There's nothing in black and white that says you have to use new multipliers (to settle the appeals), but you do have to look at it from a practical perspective."

Babb said the new depreciation multipliers the State Tax Commission has adopted for utility company personal property were based on appraisals supplied by the utility companies themselves. The resulting figures more resembled a net book price than the real-world cost of purchasing transmission and distribution lines and equipment on the open market.

"They're looking at historic costs, not present value."

Dean Babb
—City assessor

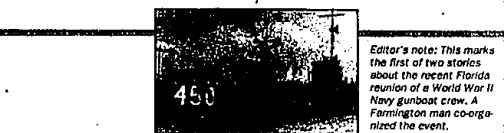
"It doesn't produce a reasonable (taxable) value," Babb said. "They're looking at historic costs, not present value." The courts have already maintained that's not the right way to look at personal property values, he added.

Please see TAX, A6

REUNION



Battling boys: (Photo above) Members of the LCIG-450 pose during a break from World War II action. Kneeling front left is the ship's captain, Lt. Thomas Kennedy Jr. while sitting at far right (middle row) is a young George Kern, now a Farmington resident. The photo of the ship (upper right) was taken at Saipan, where it was sent after being severely damaged by shore batteries on Iwo Jima in February, 1945. One man was KIA and five others incurred injuries.



Editor's note: This marks the first of two stories about the recent Florida reunion of a World War II Navy gunboat crew. A Farmington man co-organized the event.

RECALLING GLORY DAYS

Navy crew members revel in each other's company

BY TIM SMITH
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One by one, like waves on the Pacific, members of U.S. Navy Landing Craft Infantry Gunboat 450 arrived at the hotel lobby for their 14th annual reunion in Ft. Myers, Fla.

Farmington's George Kern enthusiastically welcomed old LCIG-450 comrades, family, friends and visitors in the lobby of the Holiday Inn Sunspree. Kern's gruff-but-friendly greeting sounded as though all were active sailors waiting for their next mission.

"Hey Smith," he shouted to this reporter, who traveled south to cover the Nov. 18-21 reunion. "After you put your gear away, come on back!"

Actually, the group did have a two-pronged mission to attend to — recalling hazy World War II memories and regaling in the joy of seeing old friends once again.

Organizing and co-hosting this year's reunion were Kern and Ed Goossens, who lives near Alpena.

The next LCIG-450 alumnus to arrive at the hotel was Vaughn Hampton, of Colorado.

"Party time," said Hampton, describing what he expected at the shindig. "We re-tell the stories. But we always win the



Farmington connection: George and Betty Kern of Farmington pose with daughter Cathy Witt (center) at her Florida home, site of a barbecue for members of the U.S. Navy L.C.I.G.-450.

same battles." Nearby, Goossens gave a big hug to LaBelle Ross, wife of crew member Mike Ross.

In what was a precursor of the weekend, the gray-haired sailors were young men once again, full of vigor and sharp wit. The barbs flew like mortar shells.

"He was a cook at one time," Kern said, with a glance over at Goossens.

Please see REUNION, A3

Gala tickets still available

Tickets are still on sale for the much-anticipated Civic Theatre Grand Re-Opening Gala Weekend. A \$50-per-ticket gala on Saturday, Jan. 8, 2000, probably will be the celebration's pinnacle.

The biggest highlight of the weekend is the Saturday, Jan. 8, Civic gala. Tickets (priced at \$50 each) must be purchased in person at the offices of Farmington City Manager Frank Lauff, 23600 Liberty Street. They are available on a first-come, first-served basis, and must be paid for by check or cash. There only will be available seating for 268 patrons.

The gala will also include a "vintage" movie, the unveiling of the Civic Theatre mural — which is currently being created in the lobby — cocktails and hors d'oeuvres at Legato (next to the Civic) and valet parking.



Police nab three youths in home invasion spree

BY JONI HUBRED
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Farmington Hills police believe they've stopped what Chief Bill Dwyer described as a "home invasion crime spree," with the arrest of three young men on Dec. 12.

Thieves never take a holiday at this time of year, he warned. Detectives believe these suspects — ages 19, 16 and 14 and all residents of Independence Green Apartments — had an especially busy weekend.

All three were dressed in heavy, dark clothing and prepared for cold weather. "They were bouncing from one apartment complex to another," Dwyer said.

In all, police believe the three were involved in a dozen home invasion burglaries or attempts, at Independence Green, Muirwood and Windmere apartment complexes. After checking to make sure no one was home, one of the youths would enter the apartment, then let the others in, Dwyer said.

Items recovered included jewelry, papers and a portable stereo system. "I'm sure we haven't recovered all the property," Dwyer said, adding the young men gave no explanation or reason for what they did.

Dwyer credited Officer John Piggot with cornering the three youths on Elm, after responding to a complaint of suspicious persons at the Independence Green apartments Dec. 12. When he

■ In all, police believe the three were involved in a dozen home invasion burglaries or attempts, at Independence Green, Muirwood and Windmere apartment complexes.

noticed they were all very nervous and perspiring, he called for backup.

Police said the suspects later confessed. The 19-year-old was expected to be arraigned Tuesday; the 16-year-old was released to his mother's custody, and the 14-year-old is a ward of the state.

"This was excellent police work by Officer Piggot," Dwyer said.

He urged all residents to take extra precautions, as police see a higher number of home invasions committed over the holiday season. Farmington Hills Police Department doesn't endorse any home security systems, but Dwyer said a number of companies offer excellent home monitoring services.

In addition, the chief said, residents should make sure doors and windows are secured, call police to report suspi-

Please see ARRESTS, A7

City's Richards seeks Novi city manager job

BY TIM SMITH
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Being second banana in a city like Farmington is wonderful. But Bill Richards apparently is hungering for a crack at the top job in "exciting" Novi.

Richards, who has served more than five years as Farmington's assistant city manager, is one of 27 candidates for the Novi city manager's position. He will be interviewed 12:30 p.m. Saturday at the Novi Civic Center. The 45-minute interview will be televised on Novi Channel 13.

The current field will later be whittled down to a round of finalists: Novi City Manager Ed Kriewell is retiring Feb. 11, 2000, from the job he has held for a quarter century. "Novi is clearly an exciting community," said Richards Tuesday. "It's a growth community. And by all accounts, there's an outstanding staff there."

"From a city management standpoint, it presents itself as a career challenge, a truly exciting career opportunity."

Richards, a veteran of 11 years in municipal government, would stand to receive a "sizeable increase" in

salary. As of Jan. 1, 2000, he is scheduled to receive about \$67,000 as assistant city manager in Farmington.

Farmington City Manager Frank Lauff and the Farmington City Council have given Richards their blessing to pursue the Novi job.

"Bill is very talented and has been a real plus for our city," said Farmington Mayor Bill Hartsock. "Someone like him, with his talent ... if he'd like to move up, we'd certainly support that."

"Obviously, we'd hate to see him go."

Despite his candidacy, Richards wanted to emphasize he isn't unhappy in his current position.

Please see RICHARDS, A6



PHOTO BY BILL BARZILLA

Considered: Farmington Assistant City Manager Bill Richards will be interviewed Saturday.



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