

editorial opinion

Trustees quit arguing and get down to business

At long last, Farmington school board watchers safely can leave blankets and pillows at home. Trustees have quit turning their Tuesday evening meetings into vigils welcoming the wee hours of Wednesday morning.

A large part of the credit for the board's new, more business-like look can be given to its president, Anne Struble.

Although we were skeptical about her ability to shepherd the various egos of trustees, Mrs. Struble has proven to be an able leader.

In living up to her vow to finish the meetings at a time before fatigue and tempers interrupt common sense, she has interjected a new note of efficiency into the board.

Unlike her predecessor, she is managing to avoid repetitious monologues on the pet peeves or subjects of some board members.

INSTEAD OF DAWDLING over issues and engaging in the furthering of personality clashes, board members have been pushed gently into making timely decisions.

Members found the opportunity to parade their new attitude during hearings concerning the closing of Ten Mile Elementary School.

In spite of the leanings of several trustees to put off the decision to another day, Mrs. Struble coaxed them into announcing their final choice after the hearing.

Although the decision to close Ten Mile was unwelcomed by parents, it spared them additional weeks or months of anxiety over the fate of their school.

In this instance, a quick decision was a humane decision.

After the announcement, the audience in the high school auditorium breathed a sigh of relief.

The COLA issue

One tale of 2 strikes

One day back in the early '70s, the honorable Roland H. (Ron) Upton burst merrily into the newsroom beaming with pride at his latest accomplishment.

Ron figured he had made history, of a sort: As superintendent of Livonia School District, he had negotiated a labor contract with a cost of living adjustment (COLA) in it. So far as he or anyone else knew, it was the first public employees labor contract in these parts with a COLA clause.

Now, in those days, Ron Upton (now retired) was something of a sacred cow, and so I didn't tell him what I really felt about his new contract. Besides, he was a lovable, bubbly personality, and it would have been a shame to spoil his day by telling him he had made a disastrous blunder.

WHAT MAKES THIS recollection timely is that in recent weeks we have been treated to two strikes by public employees in which COLA was the issue, one in Oakland and one in Wayne counties. Both times management held firm, and the union failed to get unlimited COLAs.

In Oakland County, members of Local 199 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) settled with the administration after a 2½-week strike. County Executive Daniel T. Murphy not only refused to agree to COLA; he had even refused to negotiate it.

To be sure, Murphy paid a price for this victory. The price was a wage adjustment a little bit higher than the county's final offer in bargaining. The union figured it did better than it would have done without a strike, so its majority is apparently satisfied.

The City of Livonia took a strike by Local 192 of the same union, which hit the bricks for a little more than a week.

The Livonia union wanted unlimited COLA and finally settled for a COLA of 26 cents an hour (about four per cent for lowest rated workers) plus a two per cent pay boost.

THE PROBLEM, from the point of view of local government, is that revenues can't be increased by a price hike, the way an auto company can increase them.

The biggest single source of local government funding is the property tax. If valuations are rising in your jurisdiction, you can afford some kind of increase in costs. Otherwise, you're in impossible trouble that can't be cured without layoffs. COLA is tied to the so-called consumer price index produced by the federal government. It's based on the living expenses of an urban family of four under certain kinds of housing conditions and with certain habits.

It is one of many price indexes which abound in our economy—others being the wholesale price index, commodity indexes, stock prices and so on. Real estate valuations don't necessarily increase at exactly the same rate as consumer prices. And so, to tie government spending on employees' wages to one index while your revenues

Sometimes, like children with a new-found favorite toy, the board clings a bit too much to its new habits.

Instead of the fruitless arguing that would accompany a board decision, members sometime put an emphasis on the pace of the discussion, especially during the period allotted to public comment.

Mrs. Struble's instruction for parents to write a letter of complaint after a few minutes of discussion can come across to the audience and other trustees as being too quick.

I'M SURE some members of the audience have sat down, feeling as if they were being cut off from expressing their feelings about the way the district is run.

We applaud a quick decision made when it's needed, but parents ought to feel their comments are being heeded.

Now that they've discovered the meaning to efficiency, trustees should to remember the definition of flexibility.

LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Countdown on SBT

The Governor's Single Business Tax advisory task force took a straw vote the other day and found that nine members thought it should be revised, nine thought it should be thrown out and four couldn't decide whether it was worth the bother.

With that kind of weak backing, the SBT—so extremely unpopular among local business folks—certainly ought to be scrapped. It's clearly time to start over on how Michigan taxes businesses.



Tim Richard

are tied to real estate valuations is to court disaster.

IN AN ERA OF double-digit inflation of the consumer price index, then, it is not surprising that two top administrators—Oakland's Murphy and Livonia's Mayor Ed McNamara—would take a strike rather than give into a demand for unlimited cost of living adjustments.

It's not surprising they would yield a bit on money issues for which they can budget in order to avoid the grim uncertainty of wages tied automatically to the consumer price index.

Had Murphy and McNamara given in, there is a real possibility Oakland County and the City of Livonia would have had to resort to layoffs in some future year in order to give senior employees cost-of-living pay increases. The effect would be for senior employees to continue drawing growing paychecks while the junior employees are thrown to the wolves. One would think the younger employees would wake up and quit striking for unlimited COLAs.

On the road, in restaurants... rudeness

Do the actions of some people really turn you off? Try some of these on for size.

People who drive in the left or fast lane of the expressway when there are no cars in the right lane.

People who line up in the "Eight Items or Less" line in a supermarket when they have a whole basketful of groceries.

Restaurants that keep you waiting for half an hour in the bar when you have a reservation.

People who call your house around the dinner hour.

People who borrow something and either don't return it or return it in a damaged condition.

What about calling home and having the line busy for half an hour?

People who open their car door into the side of your car in a parking lot.

GUYS WHO light up cigars when they're sitting next to you at a sporting event.

Women in the family borrowing your razor to

WILL THE ONE ON THE LEFT RECOVER?



What gov't. costs per unit

One of the big suburban stories that broke this week was that Wayne County General Hospital may be closed.

Wayne County Commission Chairman John Barr released the threat at a press conference on Monday, during which he announced the formation of a task force to study the future of the big hospital, located in Westland.

Barr cited as a cause for the study a report prepared by the Detroit Area Hospital Council, which listed 13 ways that the county could relieve the financial strain of running the hospital. "The commissioners have done a pitiful job in running a major health-care facility," Barr added.

A major part of Barr's argument is that per patient costs at Wayne General run \$330 daily, while the county could purchase the same services from Harper and Grace hospitals in Detroit for \$179 per day.

THE INTERESTING thing about all this is that, for the first time in a long while, we see a spokesman for a government unit actually talking in terms that try to express the cost to the taxpayers of a unit of service. In this case, the cost to Wayne County taxpayers for one day of care for a patient at Wayne General is \$330, whereas the same services could be bought from other hospitals for \$179.

This is at odds with the way government bureaucrats and politicians usually talk about the cost of government. They always talk about how many total dollars are in the budget, never about how much government costs per unit of service.

For example, the new 1977-1978 budget for the state of Michigan unveiled Monday by Gov. Milliken is \$3.8 billion. Oakland County's budget for fiscal 1976 was \$60,358,347. The City of Livonia says its annual budget is around \$13.7 million, not counting the water and sewer funds.

Now, I certainly can't get my head around \$60 million or \$3.8 billion, not to mention the \$13.7 million for Livonia, and except for some big bank presidents or the chairman of GM, I don't think anyone else can either.

Not only that, but these big budget numbers are always expressed in the aggregate. They don't say just how much it costs to run the government per unit of service.

Livonia doesn't say just how much it costs the taxpayers per pothole repaired. Oakland County doesn't say how much it costs for the Road Commission to plow one mile of snow-covered road. The State of Michigan doesn't say just how much it costs to keep one prisoner at Jackson for a year.

THE RELUCTANCE of government units to express their budgets in costs per amount of service is all the more curious when this practice is com-

Observation Point

by PHILIP H. POWER



pared with the way businesses and families do their budgeting.

Most businesses express their costs per unit of output: It costs GM, for example, \$2,500 to make a Chevy; it costs this newspaper around 14 cents in newsprint for one newspaper; it costs a law firm \$25 per hour to have a lawyer on the staff.

Without knowing these numbers, it is plainly impossible for any business to run itself effectively. If GM could get a Chevy manufactured for a lot less than \$2,500 by subcontracting the job to Chrysler, it might save a lot of money by doing so. If a law firm can't get at least \$25 per hour in billings for its lawyers, it will have to make some changes. And so forth.

Similarly, most families I know of (and that includes my own) set up their budgets in costs per unit. So much per month for rent, so much for utilities, so much per week for food, and five or six bucks a week for entertainment. Again, it's not a case there pa says to ma at the beginning of the year that the family's got \$16,800 to spend for the year and lets it go at that. Instead, they break down that \$16,800 into monthly and weekly expenses per unit of service or goods that they intend to buy.

PERSONALLY I believe there is a whole lot of money wasted by our government, whether at the local, state or federal level. I also believe the costs governments pay per unit of service are in many cases absurdly high—Wayne County General Hospital being a useful current example.

And I'm absolutely convinced that one reason this is so is that governments either do not or cannot express their costs per unit of service so the taxpayers can get a clear idea of just how much government service is costing them.

For example, if the City of Livonia discovered that it costs \$750 per pothole to repair the city streets, just how long would the outraged taxpayers of the city let that kind of waste go on?

That's why I'm so interested in John Barr and how he is tackling the problem of Wayne County General Hospital. If it costs nearly twice as much per patient day to treat people in Wayne County General than elsewhere, what possible excuse is there for keeping the facility going?

Keep it up, John. You're on to a good thing!

Eccentricities

by HENRY M. HOGAN, JR.



shave their legs and not putting a new blade in it when they are finished.

What about being seated at the table overlooking the kitchen door in a nice restaurant?

Then there is the host of the party who doesn't shovel his front walk after a snowstorm.

Or when you're calling somebody on the phone and the operator puts you on hold and then forgets about you.

HOTELS WHERE the temperature of the shower water keeps changing from hot to cold and then when you get out of the shower the bath towel is the size of a glorified washcloth.

Or when the TV repairman says that he will be out tomorrow to fix your set and you change your plans to wait for him and he doesn't show.

What about people who ignore "No Smoking" signs?

People who arrive late or leave early from a movie, show or a sports event and interrupt those who came to see the whole performance.

People who call your house after 10 p.m. People who walk against the "Walk" sign when you're driving a car.

PEOPLE WHO volunteer to do something and then don't follow through.

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