

Desegregation suit haunts suburban schools

The specter of the Detroit school desegregation lawsuit continues to haunt suburban school administrators.

In Wayne and Oakland counties, it is particularly evident where fast-growing school districts serving rapidly-expanding new suburban communities about aging districts with declining enrollments.

Sharing of facilities is a potential solution to the increasing financial burdens faced by both kinds of school systems.

But suburban school administrators are wary of the potential implications on the desegregation suit still pending.

A case in point is the neighboring districts of Plymouth-Canton and Livonia.

Plymouth-Canton is struggling to find available classroom space for the steady influx of new students each year, especially from Canton Township. Livonia, on the other hand, is closing school buildings and converting them to other uses.

Except for the school desegregation suit, an obvious solution for both districts would be for the Plymouth-Canton district to rent or buy classroom space from Livonia—particularly schools being vacated near the borders of the two districts.

But school administrators are concerned that any busing of students between districts would weaken the suburban position that local taxpayers have a right to expect neighborhood schools, and should not have their children bused outside the district for purposes of achieving racial integration.

If busing across district lines were done to avoid building new schools in Plymouth-Canton, the federal courts likely would be more inclined to assume similar cross-district busing could be accomplished to achieve racial integration between Detroit Public Schools and suburban school districts. At least that is the fear of school administrators.

JOHN M. HOBEN, superintendent of Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, has considered buying or leasing vacated schools from Livonia.

In fact, in late February a meeting was held between administrators of the two districts.

Administrators toured two schools which could be used by Plymouth-Canton. Whether they will depend, in part, on the feelings of both superintendents on how such an exchange might affect liability in the school desegregation lawsuit still pending in federal district court.

LAST YEAR a multi-million dollar bond issue for new construction was defeated by Plymouth-Canton voters. In April the board is seeking voter approval of another bond issue, to fund for construction and expansion of existing buildings. But the central administration is very cautious about going the new construction route out of fear they, too, will be stuck with empty buildings once enrollment declines during the next decade.

A few months ago, Supt. Hoben discussed with school trustees the possibilities of buying or renting space from Livonia or Wayne-Westland school districts.

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At that time, Hoben cautioned that it would not be a good political move as parents would be unhappy about having their children bused five to 10 miles.

Hoben then added that another concern was the legal implications such arrangements would have

on the desegregation suit.

Two years ago when Livonia vacated buildings close to the Plymouth border, discussions also were held on the possibility of a purchase or rental arrangement. At that time, the Plymouth-Canton Board of Education opted to go for a bond issue

and construction of new elementary and middle schools.

With defeat of that bond issue, and families still pouring into Canton, the idea of using one or two Livonia schools has again surfaced.

Hoben said different opinions are given by attorneys as to the legal implications on the school desegregation lawsuit of busing between suburban districts. But both the Michigan Association of School Boards and the Michigan Association of School Administrators advise against such a move.

"We aren't even close to a decision on whether to use Livonia buildings," Hoben stressed. "Livonia is interested in unloading its vacated buildings and invited us to have a look. It's all in the exploratory stage; in fact, we went more as a courtesy."

"There's no legal implications involved in just taking a look. We'll consider that issue if we get to the decision stage, and we may never."

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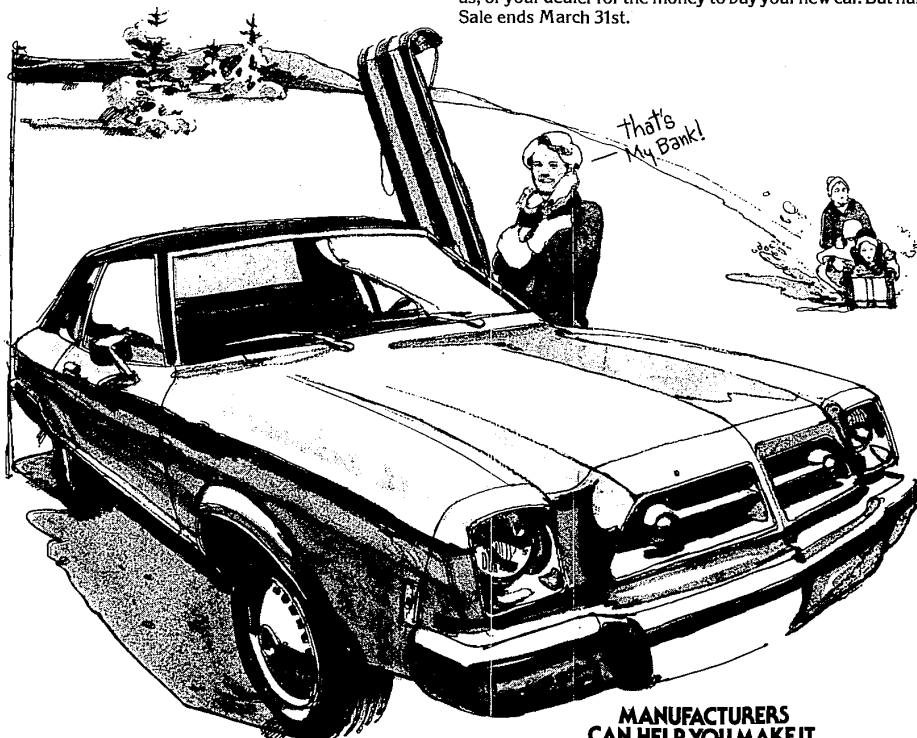
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