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In City of Farmington

Federal's shuts down outlet

By LYNN ORR

Federal's is leaving downtown Farmington by July 31. But the landlord isn't talking about the future of the building which has housed Farmington's sole major downtown department store.

"We're investigating possibilities, talking to architects," says John Clappison, one of the partners of Farmington Center Co., which owns the building and property on Grove and Grand River.

Clappison refused to comment on an announcement by the head of Federal's that the Farmington store and two others in the metropolitan area would be shut down.

Store personnel applied for a "going out of business" permit from the city last week.

Steven West, the chain's controversial board chairman, said Tuesday that Federal's had been paid in excess of \$50,000 "to terminate its lease at one of the three stores to be closed. He would not name the landlord.

Referring to the Farmington store, West said, "The landlord agreed to let

us out of the lease on very advantageous terms." About 10 years and a "couple of million dollars" remains on the lease, he said.

Clappison refused to say whether his firm paid Federal's to terminate the lease.

The other stores to be closed are in Sterling Heights and at another location which has not been disclosed.

The three closings will leave the chain with 23 stores in southeast Michigan.

Clappison also refused to comment on plans for the building after it is vacated.

With Federal's departure the owners might try to find another major tenant or divide the 60,000-square-foot building into several stores.

"We haven't as yet decided on any course of action," Clappison said.

FEDERAL'S departure is based strictly on economics, West said at a press conference Wednesday.

"We just realized we were complaining ourselves to try and make it as a warehouse and a store," he said. Asked how much money the Farm-

ington store had lost last year, West told reporters \$300,000.

He hopes to employ the Farmington staff at other stores in the Detroit area, he added.

Although West admitted that the Farmington store was the chain's biggest loser, the departure is a reversal of the store's stated intentions just a month ago.

West appeared before the city council on May 15 to ask that the store be allowed to expand warehouse space, a move opposed by some neighboring merchants and city officials. West wanted to increase storage in the building to accommodate a warehouse to serve six other suburban stores.

Devolving more space to storage would violate city ordinances, however. Councilmen also were displeased that Federal's had begun the warehouse remodeling without applying for building permits.

The council did agree, however, to allow the store one month to propose a "satisfactory resolution."

Neighboring residents complained of increased truck traffic on Slocum at the rear of the building, while city officials were concerned about violations of building codes and possibly the fire code.

In addition, Mayor Richard Tupper went on record at that time opposing Federal's expansion into food retailing. West confirmed Wednesday that the chain would begin to sell food items at a discount in the remaining stores.

West had argued that increased warehousing would solve the store's problems but opted to close the store anyway.

He said that the city's posture did

not influence the firm's decision to depart.

"The council has been extremely cooperative through all of this," he said.

OPINION IS DIVIDED about the possible impact of the store's departure, according to sources close to the issue. There is some speculation that the loss of Farmington's only major department store might hurt other downtown businesses. But the departure may be a welcome relief to merchants and city officials who are convinced the store failed to fulfill a "drawing card" function.

Mayor Tupper, for one, is glad to see Federal's go.

"I felt the store for a number of years was well-respected, but then the store started to change, going to food and such," Tupper said.

He's not convinced that another major department store is the answer. "The vitality of downtown is good," he added. "I understand that a number of people would like to move into that building if it's split up."

THE CONSTRUCTION of the building in the mid-1960s prompted a hue and cry among residents who were opposed to the structure's proximity to the Grand River sidewalks.

That was an error overlooked in the site plan, Tupper said.

"The planning commission as well as the owners are sorry because it's presented nothing but problems." But although moving the building a few feet is impossible, the store's departure may benefit the community, he added.



Steven West, chairman of the board for Federal's Department Stores, announced at a Wednesday morning press conference that the Farmington outlet would be closing sometime before July 31. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)

Mervyn Ross retires as school trustee

By LYNN ORR

Handing your eldest child her high school diploma as she walks across the Ford Auditorium stage is a thrill.

To some, that one 10-second incident as a school board trustee wouldn't justify the hundreds of hours meted out during seven years of tenure on the Farmington School Board.

But to retiring trustee Dr. Mervyn Ross, presenting Harrison High's diploma to daughter Amy was the most personally gratifying experience as a board member.

Stepping down, however, doesn't come easily. Ross announced his resignation at Tuesday night's board meeting, confirming speculation that he and his family would be leaving Farmington Hills after nine years of residency.

A warmer climate has enticed the Canadian-born Ross to Phoenix, Ariz., where he'll hang out a shingle as a physician and, in essence, begin again.

After years of toying with the idea of moving to sunnier climes, the Rosses made the decision to move in April, shortly after the filing deadline for two open seats on the school board. With his resignation, a third new member will be added to be filled by a board appointment.

HIS DEFECTION of the announcement elicited some criticism, but Ross maintains that he didn't want to influence the election in any way.

"Jack (Jack Litch who topped the voting in the June 12 election) was the only candidate who showed an interest in the district over the years," Ross says. He wanted to avoid giving candidates the impression that the runner-up would be a show-in for his own seat.

But Ross has no objections to a board appointment for his seat. In fact, that's how he originally climbed on board in 1971. He was elected to a four-year term the following year and re-elected in 1976. During those years, he's seen the board cope with internal friction, resignations, declining enrollment and the resultant cutbacks in state aid, as well as the perennial fiscal pinch.

But he has little advice for new board members, other than to jump in.

"The issues that have confronted the school district have been more challenging than any of my colleagues," he says, soft-pedaling all queries about his public clashes with fellow trustee Michael Splice.

"I've never brought an issue before the school board that I didn't feel of general interest to the district as a whole," he adds. Splice uses Robert's Rules of Order to play politics, Ross claims, while he denies the same role.

BUT HE does admit that he's often been on the losing end of a 6-1 vote, while colorfully debating his point.

He believes, however, that a chairman's role is to end discussion after one or two board members are "hoarding" the floor. When he served as board president during one of the board's most trying years in 1973, one of his primary roles was that of peace-maker.

"That was the year we had a teachers' strike, three resignations on the board, increased vandalism and had to



DR. MERVYN ROSS

hire a new superintendent," he recalls. "It was exciting," he admits, with a trace of a smile, but the experience also reinforced his theory that the board's primary function is one of policy-making.

"Top leadership at the professional level of education is responsible for the character of the district," Ross maintains. To that end, it's the board's responsibility to establish policy, take responsibility for the financial ends and be responsive to the concerns of the community, he believes.

The current board has fulfilled that function, he believes, and kept an "even keel" in educational status.

HIS PERSONAL concerns, however, haven't come along quite as well as he would wish. The district has failed to come as far as he would have liked in the areas of minority understanding, sex education and financial security.

But those subjects are dependent on social changes at large, stalling progress in the educational system, he argues. The school district is capable of all making minimal progress on its own, he says.

He would like to see the board and the cities of Farmington and Farmington Hills working more closely toward toward community goals, one of Ross' own personal goals that hasn't been met.

The biggest affect the school district has had is offering constructive criticism on legislation introduced by legislators. We haven't introduced things ourselves," he says.

"We haven't communicated enough among ourselves to express the interests of the community. When conflict exists at the local level, there's less credence at the higher levels."

Ross himself, as the board's representative to the City of Farmington Hills, attempted throughout the past year to open the lines of communication with city officials.

But he admits that little progress has been made.

Perhaps that's a challenge for the new board, he offers.

Why your home needs inspection

If you're planning to buy a house in Farmington Hills, city officials wish you would shell out an extra \$40 for an inspection.

You could avoid some unwelcome surprises.

For instance, take the case of Mrs. Ramond Conn. Last December, she and her husband paid \$92,000 for a nine-year-old house that didn't quite come up to their expectations.

Mrs. Conn says there have been plumbing problems and leaking cracks in the basement, the air conditioner worked right and in the winter the front door and some of the windows were encased in ice. The front

door, she says, was frozen shut most of the season.

"I don't feel like we were done fair," says Mrs. Conn. "You figure out how many hours you have to work to get \$92,000. We just really got gypped."

The real estate company gave her a one-year maintenance contract to cover some of the problems, but most remained.

Richard Miller, the building and zoning inspection supervisor in Farmington Hills, says these situations can often be avoided if the parties in the sale of a home will agree to a city inspection.

While people are willing to spend

thousands for a home, they are often unwilling—or unaware—that they can get a thorough inspection for a relatively modest cost.

Mrs. Conn says she and her husband knew nothing about the city's service, which is voluntary, not required for the sale of a home but highly recommended by Miller.

"Here they're making one of the biggest investments of their lives," he says, "and they will hesitate to come in and have the thing inspected."

According to Miller and John Waid, the Hills' building operations supervisor, less than one per cent of the

homes being sold in the city will get inspections.

And, they say, the requests for inspections vary inversely to the housing market.

"As prices went up, inspection requests went down," says Miller. "When the economy was at a low ebb, we had more requests."

IN THE CASE of the Conns' home, located in the Normandy Hills subdivision, the real estate company maintains that the problems with the house are between the buyer and seller.

According to Jim Stevens, a vice-president of Real Estate One, which handled the sale, Mrs. Conn should make up a list of problems for the real estate company to forward to the previous owner of the house.

"She has not gone through the usual channels to get things resolved," he says.

Mrs. Conn, meanwhile, says she and her husband are considering taking legal action against the real estate company and the previous owner.

She says their attorney had inserted in the housing contract a clause saying that "all heating, electrical and plumbing equipment" was in working order at the time of sale. And, she says, all those things were not in working order.

According to the real estate division of the state Department of Licensing and Regulation, the responsibility of the real estate company lies in bringing a buyer and seller of a home to an agreement.

Laverne Francis, complaint supervisor, (Continued on Page 2A)

Council defeats reduction in senior housing height

By STEVE BARNABY
Farmington editor

A proposal to reconsider the height limitation for senior citizen housing was defeated in a 4-1 vote at this week's Farmington Hills Council session.

Making the proposal was Councilman Earl Oppertbauer who said the council should study whether the 80-foot limitation should be rolled back to 50 feet.

Noting against the Oppertbauer initiative were councilmembers John Alkateeb, Cathy Jones, Joanne Smith and Mayor Jan Dolan. Absent were councilmembers Keith Deacon and Jody Strosen.

The original 80-foot height limitation was set last year for the RCE-1 special zoning for senior citizen housing. Since that time opposition has arisen to that zoning, including an attempt by the Council of Homeowners of Farmington Hills to have a ballot question to rescind the zoning.

But since presenting their petitions, the Homeowners' efforts have been frustrated when the city clerk denied the request to put the question on the ballot.

Oppertbauer said that rolling back the height limitation could stifle the majority of resident opposition. The Homeowners' group is contemplating entering a court suit to stop construction of senior housing under the RCE-1 designation.

The advantage to implementing a 50 foot limitation, said Oppertbauer, would be in keeping with height restrictions of other structures already built in the city, such as the Ten Mile

Holiday Inn and Botsford General Hospital.

Oppertbauer also said that a 50-foot restriction wouldn't make much difference in cost to developers.

But his proposal met much opposition.

Aldo Vagnozzi, a member of the Farmington Democratic Club, was vehement in his opposition.

"I'm surprised to see this proposal at this time from Earl. It would be a turnaround on those people who supported him in the last election," claimed Vagnozzi.

"I don't believe this would reduce the opposition to the mid-rise housing. The same people who opposed the 60 foot height also opposed the 80-foot height proposal."

Oppertbauer, during the last election, ran on the basis of his support for senior citizen housing.

Vagnozzi warned that bringing up the height limitation once again would have the opposite effect of Oppertbauer's intent of quelling the furor.

Alkateeb, who has opposed the RCE-1 zoning in the past, said he was voting against the height reduction because it would still leave the special zoning designation on the books.

His opposition has been based on the theory that a special zoning endangers the city's low profile building philosophy. He fears other developers may bring a law suit claiming discrimination because they would be disallowed from building high-rise or mid-rise buildings for uses other than senior citizen housing.

"This whole question could be solved by putting it on the ballot and letting the people decide," said Alkateeb, who

previously was a board representative of the Council of Homeowners.

"Yes, I've said that I would support senior citizen housing of ten, 12 and even 20 stories under certain conditions, but I don't believe in RCE-1 zoning," he said.

Alkateeb has proposed that the city build its own senior housing by granting variances, instead of having special zoning.

Smith disagreed with Alkateeb, saying she is opposed to having buildings any higher than 60 feet and that buildings 10 or 20 stories were unthinkable.

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