

Monday's Commentary

Council sculpts a piece of political hypocrisy

The recent shenanigans pulled off by the Farmington Hills City Council remind me of what English essayist William Hazlitt once said:

"The only vice that cannot be forgiven is hypocrisy. The repentance of a hypocrite is itself hypocrisy."

Disgusted, disillusioned and disappointed are the only words I can find to describe my feelings when discovering that the Gang of Seven up at the corner of Eleven Mile and Orchard Lake intentionally circumvented the 1976 Open Meetings Act.

Anybody who cares for free and open local government should feel likewise.

Basically, the council decided to worm around the law by breaking itself into a subcommittee to interview candidates for the vacant city manager position.

Under the Open Meetings Act, all interviews of city manager candidates must be conducted in public—if a quorum is present. The council deliberately planned to avoid a quorum and therefore feels it is staying within the letter of the law.

Maybe it is and maybe it isn't.

To be safe, the council will tie a pretty bow around its procedure tonight and interview two of the four candidates in public. It then will deliver a Christmas package to the residents—a new city manager.

But the council may have slipped up this time, according to a Vince Leone of the Michigan Attorney General's office.

"This appears to be an intentional attempt to evade the act," said Leone. He's a lawyer who is paid to know the law, not to teach a council tricks in how to do an end run around the law.

Other councils have used a similar procedure by selecting a subcommittee of two or three councilmembers to recommend job candidates to the council as a whole.

Another gimmick is to break the council into separate subcommittees to interview different candidates.

But the Farmington Hills councilmembers found a cute little trick of their own. They appointed themselves as "the" subcommittee, meeting at different times with the same candidates—but never a quorum.

And so the most important position in city government probably will be filled by a person whose views and background are being kept a closely guarded secret.

The problem, of course, is finding someone to challenge the council. Even though the Open Meetings Act is relatively simple to understand, it is a new law and has yet to be much in court.

The Ann Arbor City Council learned about this law the hard way. One group decided to take a partisan "caucus" in secret and amend the city budget. They were caught and taken to court. The budget was invalidated. The visiting judge who tried the case was Gene Schnelz, whom Oakland County voters had the good sense to elevate to the circuit bench last month.

Unfortunately, the Hills council could go legally unscathed—unless someone decides to drag them into court.

A nice provision of the Open Meetings Act is that if someone does take court action and wins, the wrongdoers have to pay lawyers' costs.

But let's say no one does take them to court. There is another aspect to be considered.

While it may have stayed within the letter of the law, the council certainly has violated the spirit of the law.

Seeing something like this makes a person wonder about somebody like Councilman Joe Alkateeb. The self-appointed spokesman of the people, whatever that means, recently pruned his feathers and bragged that he was joining the recall movement in its attempts to remove colleagues Jan Dolan, Cathy Jones and Joanne Smith from office.

"I have decided to support the recall because the present city council is suffering from a confidence crisis. Nobody seems to trust us anymore," he said.

No kidding, Joe.

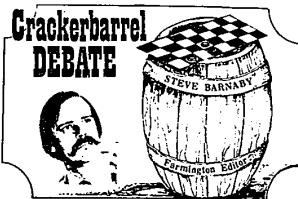
His claim is that the voters should be well-informed and that he, as a councilman, does just that. He maintains that only Mmes. Jones, Dolan and Smith are flagrant enough violators of the voters' trust to be recalled.

What a joke. Those who believe Alkateeb to be the homeowners' hero should take another look. He definitely has flunked this test of openness by joining in on the secret interviews.

Smith, Alkateeb's archenemy, is another case in point. Here we have a leader who prides herself in opening up government's doors and unraveling the bureaucratic red tape.

But some persons, having acquired power, become elitists.

The mentality goes something like "the general



public doesn't know what questions to ask. The council knows the qualities we want in a city manager."

And that's a direct quote, folks.

That's disappointing.

Now don't get me wrong about the recall. From the beginning, I've thought the residents of Farmington Hills would be unwise to support the recall effort. It is based on a lot of distortion and some very suspicious motives from various quarters.

I'm not suggesting that residents run out and take out recall petitions on the rest of the councilmembers.

What I am suggesting is that voters should examine, very closely, the performance of this council.

The public should demand an explanation of why the public was shut out of the process of choosing a city manager—especially in light of the recent city manager and county elections.

Tinkering Around

by LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Case of the unnecessary 'A'

I must sympathize with Dr. Lee Halsted and his family. Imagine having a road named after you. It must be a source of great family pride.

Now imagine having that same road contain enough incorrect signs so that your family name is misspelled through at least two cities, one township and two counties.

I was sure the name Okrutsky was an easy target for the mad misspellers of this world. I have long ago discarded the touchingly naive belief that everyone knew the apostrophe "O" stood for the word "of" and that no one would put an apostrophe in an Eastern European name.

Boy, was I wrong. Even my landlord sends me receipts with an apostrophe in my last name.

But the annoyance I feel has to be really mild when I think of what the Halsted family must feel when they see the road signs on Halstead Road.

Please notice that the road sign has never used. Instead of being happy that the Oakland County Road Commission, Farmington, Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield and the Wayne County Road Commission all gave the family a whole extra letter at a time when most people believe they get nothing free from government, the Halsted's admit to being a little peeved.

"IT'S A SORE POINT," admits Dr. Halsted.

"They know how to spell it in Chicago, but they don't know how to spell it here," he said of the mistake.

To add to the insult, originally the road commissions managed to spell Halsted correctly. Old road maps omit the extra 'A' in the name. But 25 years ago it mysteriously appeared on the sign.

Halsted without the second 'A' is a hamlet in England. It's also the father of American surgery spelled his name, Dr. Halsted points out.

And in Canada, most persons assume the name is spelled without the extra 'A'.

But in Michigan, you know which cities township and counties haven't heard the news.

It's a bit of a letdown to the Halsted cousins, according to Dr. Halsted, who journey across the country to Michigan only to discover the family name is misspelled on road signs.

If your name is misspelled on a piece of junk mail, you can throw it away. But a road sign is a different matter.

"The son of my cousin in Hawaii was here. He wanted his picture taken by the road sign. He said he traveled 5,000 miles to find the family road misspelled."

"He said he'd never forget it," Halsted said.

Along the way, there's some comfort in the fact that the Halsted family isn't the only local folk to have their name publicly and prominently misspelled. The Power family name has an extra 'S' on the end of it on some of the road signs in Farmington, a fact that breeds some gloom to the camps of candidate Phil Power's opponents in the state's recent Senate race.

In the meantime, the Farmington Hills Historical Commission has decided to ride to the rescue. Owen Grinager, a neighbor of the Halsted family who insists on omitting the 'A' when she addresses her envelopes, compiled a three-page list of the location of all the misspelled signs.

That's three typewritten pages, folks. For those of you who want to make a tour of the faulty road signs, here's a short, short list: Westbound Eight Mile and Halsted, westbound Eight Mile and Halsted, westbound M102, west of Drake on the overpass, at Rhinewood near Eight Mile, west Freedom, southbound Grand River and in West Bloomfield Township, on Pontiac Trail.

Nelda Chubinski, a member of the Farmington Hills historical commission, is writing letters to the offending governments to point out the errors of their sign shops. Her explanation for the mess is that years ago people weren't particular about how they spelled each other's names.

"THE OLD RECORDS that the historical commission uses are old school board records. People weren't all too literate then. People's names are spelled differently every time," she said.

It makes me wonder how many misspelled gravestones there are in the area.

The Oakland County Road Commission suggests that the local city councils pass a resolution stating their agreement the signs are misspelled. Then, if the Oakland County Road Commission Board agrees to the proposal, they will allow the offending signs to be replaced. But the signs which are not on roads the commission usually services must be replaced by the local governments, according to Gerald Holmberg of the road commission's traffic bureau.

Of course, that could be based on the assumption that the involved council members realize they will never find a spelling bee in a zoo.

"Around the edge"

by Jackie Klein

Test drives me up a wall

If my driver's license is renewed next year, I'll get the best belated birthday present. But I'm dreading it. I'm the kind of person who would stay up all night studying for a blood and saliva test. Yet when I walk into the secretary of state's office I freeze in panic.

I haven't recovered from the last time I took the exam for my license about two months after it expired. It took me that long to muster an iota of courage.

The first thing I saw was a bunch of applications lying on the front desk. Nobody told me which one to fill out or what to do with it. So I grabbed one that didn't look like an income tax form and took my chances.

I went over to another desk and stood in a long line wondering if I should wear my glasses or borrow a seeing eye dog. I kept remembering how I passed my first road test when I was 18.

After playing an unsuccessful game of "Dodge-em" and shouting at motorists, "So you got a horn for Christmas," I landed on the curb.

"You're making me nervous," I whined to the trembling testing officer sitting beside me in my death trap. "I'm making you nervous?" he screamed in my ear. "I'm going to pass you because I might get you again and I can't afford a funeral."

GETTING back to the secretary of state's office, I was awakened from my reverie by a sharp tap on my

shoulder and a stern voice admonishing, "You're in the wrong line. Go back to the information desk and get your written form."

Where was the information desk when I needed it? I wondered, feeling like a computerized non-person.

"Information" turned out to be a bespectacled, schoolteacher monster telling a bunch of kids they couldn't get their motorcycle licenses without marmalade or papa.

I jokingly explained I left my helmet and leather jacket home, but my face only glared, handed me the exam form and ordered me into a little room. Feeling as though I just got off the boat at Ellis Island, I stared at the multiple choice questions.

I remember something stupid on the test like, "If a pedestrian walks in front of your car, do you (A) knock him down, administer first aid and make out a police report? (B) Do you back him down and run like hell? (C) Do you avoid him, swerve and smash into another car and hope you paid your insurance premium?"

Like a kid who flunked her final exam and was sure to be expelled, I stood waiting in the line I was in at the beginning.

"You got two wrong," an accusing voice barked. My answer looked like "information's" older sister. I doubt if either of them ever drove a car in their lives.

"YOU DON'T make a U-turn on an expressway, and you don't tell a

school bus driver to get off the road because you're in a hurry to get home and make dinner." Information's big-mouthed sister bellowed.

The old lady ahead of me got her temporary driver's license although she couldn't see the chart, let alone the first line of her eye test. I was feeling a bit more confident when another woman storm trooper demanded I look into the viewer.

The big print wasn't bad, but the rest resembled small, fuzzy, blurred dots. "I thought you put 'no impairment' on your application," my third accuser gasped. "Why didn't you admit you're legally blind with or without glasses?"

"I lied about my weight too," I shot back. "I wrote down 120 and I've lost 10 pounds since I came in this horror chamber."

By some miracle, I passed the eye test. Another sweetie face told me to stand on a red line and get my picture taken. I mumbled something about not caring for a photo which made me look like the top of the FBI's most wanted list.

In my state of nervous exhaustion, I stood with my back to the camera by mistake. I'm sure I heard sweetie face murmur, "You look much better that way."

I paid my money, signed my temporary license and breathed a sigh of relief that I wouldn't have to go through this ordeal for another three years. That was almost three years ago. I never did like birthdays.

from our readers

Refunds help

Editor: Now that the "Bottle Bill" passed by voters in 1978 has taken effect, I thought you would like to know answers to often-asked questions regarding the process of buying and returning beer and soft drink containers for a refund.

In 1978—before the bill was passed—20 percent of all beverage containers were returnable. Now, as a result of the new law, 100 percent of beer and soft drink containers will require deposits. Containers for wine, liquor and dairy products will remain non-returnable.

The deposits for the returnable containers vary, but 10 cents a container will probably be standard. Special return beer bottles that may be used by more than one company will most likely require less of a deposit—probably around a nickel a bottle.

Soft drink and beer companies may raise their prices, because they say

that the extra space required for storage of the empties, and added equipment and labor would force them to increase their prices more than a dime a bottle.

So you may find you are paying a steeper price for beer and wine now—even after you are handed your refund when you return your empties at the store.

Now to the question of soft drink machines. The new law will affect you in the same way you were affected before non-returnable bottles became prevalent in the machines. The price of the deposit will be figured into the price for the machine cans.

If you drink the beverage in the premises, your deposit money will be returned by that establishment. If you take the can or bottle with you, you will have to save the container if you want a refund for it.

Establishments that sell beer and soft drinks in bottles and cans have asked that the public cooperate with them during the initial months of the law's implementation to make this little inconvenience easy for everyone.

Here are some ways you can help make life a little easier for the merchants who will be burdened the most by the bottle bill:

• Take the empties back for your refund as soon as possible. Don't let them pile up.

• Bring them back either in their original cartons or in bags. Please don't crush the empty cans. Crushed cans are difficult to handle and transport.

What will be the result of all this? The people who pushed the legislation are hopeful that the law will give Michigan citizens an incentive to keep litter off our highways and beautify Michigan landscape. If we all do our part and smile at the small inconveniences it may present us at first, I believe we may be able to eliminate some of the unnecessary litter that has been caused by careless persons. Maybe if these persons lose money by throwing away a container, they'll think twice about it.

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