



John
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Unused schools as senior housing?

The problem of declining enrollments in schools has triggered emotional reactions for years among neighborhood-conscious homeowners. Change of any kind has a disquieting effect on a community. Good friends move, large trees are felled.

But the neighborhood school? Well, that seems to be a case unto itself. Perhaps it's a visual message to man that his desire for continuity through procreation is a more fragile notion than he is prepared to accept. The absence of vibrant young children in the playground, the swings moved only by breezes now, generate an eerie if not depressing feeling.

For the moment and for the foreseeable future, the problem of empty school buildings is a reality. Strange how this problem surfaces at a time when, at the other end of the life cycle, many of us are becoming more concerned about where we'll spend our declining years.

WHERE TO HOUSE the elderly, not exclusively the infirm, is as much an economic problem as a human problem.

Just like empty playgrounds, the presence of the elderly — those we think will die before we do — reminds us that we, too, will come to journey's end.

I can't understand why more effort isn't made to adapt unused school buildings for use as low-cost

housing for people who have lived in and contributed to a community over the years.

I'm not talking about nursing homes, as such, but places where people can afford to live modestly in the community with which they are familiar. Fixed incomes of retirees and increasing property taxes and upkeep on homes too often prevent continuing that lifestyle.

Many suburban school buildings have been converted to different uses in recent years as student population has declined. Few, if any, are renovated for use as living quarters.

Yet with today's construction costs, the high cost of remodeling is cheaper by far than new construction.

IN BOSTON, WHERE the municipality virtually overlaps the county, they have a different way of handling disposal of unwanted government structures.

They have a Department of Public Facilities. It is responsible for the maintenance and eventual disposal of all public structures. And, according to Director Donald Manson, the department, as well as the process it follows, is extremely community-oriented.

Just as in our communities, the school officials in

Boston are reluctant to close a school. When they do, however, the Department of Public Facilities announces availability of the structure and accepts written proposals from business speculators, citizens' groups — anyone — as to what they would like to do with the building.

Next, a public hearing is held at which those wishing title to the building are required to explain their plans and answer questions from citizens.

Then the plans are evaluated by department officials in the context of neighborhood opinion, and a decision is made.

WHAT SEEMS IMPORTANT in this process is the opportunity for anyone to bid on use of the property and for neighborhood opinion to be considered.

While the procedure is intriguing, it will not change the hearts of mankind. Why won't we prepare our communities to afford us a place to stay when we are too old to be of economic use to anyone?

Already I look at some of these school structures which I know will someday be abandoned by children and wonder what it would be like sitting in and looking out.



An empty school is a depressing sight, but couldn't it be low-cost housing for senior citizens who helped build the community? (Staff photo)

With smaller cars, why does gas consumption go up?

Richard Nixon had it wrong, I thought as I drove through some subdivisions the other day.

It was after 9 a.m. on a weekday. For the most part, men had taken the "first" car to work. What was in the driveway or the garage was the family's second set of wheels.

In 1972 I did an informal survey of the same neighborhoods. As many as eight of every 10 cars parked in the driveway or garage were Volkswagens with maybe a sprinkling of Toyotas and Datsuns. That was in the days when VW had those clever billboards advertising their product as "Mother's Little Helper."

Today a growing number of those second vehicles are vans, pickup trucks, four-wheel-drive vehicles and motor homes. In 1972 vehicles of those sizes were almost exclusively commercial. Today they are family transportation.

What made me think of Richard Nixon was that when he made his 1968 acceptance speech, he said there was nothing wrong with the American people, who were basically good; there was something wrong with the leadership.

NO, MR. NIXON, there is something wrong with the American people. Despite a tripling of gasoline prices since 1973, they're burning more fossil fuel



Tim
Richard

than ever. The "energy crisis" isn't slowing them down.

The American people are cussing Jimmy Carter in the White House and James Schlesinger in the Energy Department, and all the while the people themselves need to be looking in the mirror and blaming themselves for the energy crisis, the soaring prices and the prospect of shortages and rationing.

A few months ago, Ulf Lantzke, executive director of the International Energy Agency in Paris, was in town talking to the Detroit Economic Club about oil.

"Sales of small cars are up, amounting to 50 percent of all new cars purchased last year, against 35 percent in 1972," he said in praise. "New cars made

this year will get 19 miles per gallon, up from 14 in 1973."

Lantzke missed the sad truth. Yes, the car daddy drives to work is smaller and more fuel efficient. But that second vehicle, instead of being a subcompact getting 40 mpg, is now a van or four-wheel-drive vehicle getting 12.

And we're buying more snowmobiles. And there are more 14-year-olds heling around on motorbikes. And so on.

ALTHOUGH TODAY'S new car gets more than one-third more mpg than 1973's, have we seen a reduction in gasoline consumption?

No, Lantzke himself tells us "U.S. consumption of motor fuels over the period 1972-77 has increased at a yearly pace of about two percent." That the rate of increase in the 1960s and early '70s was six percent is scant comfort.

Larry Salci, the bright young fellow who heads the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority, recently came up with a blinger of a statistic:

"City residents use less energy than suburban residents, as they make fewer trips, of shorter duration. Recent studies have indicated that inner-city residents consume one to two gallons (of gasoline) per day. However, households in the outer suburbs were found to consume four to six gallons per day."

Keep in mind that the Carter Administration's standby rationing plans are in terms of two gallons a day.

Nope. I can't see where the American people have slowed down consumption of fossil fuel at all in the last five years. Dad's car has been downsized, but the second vehicle is a bigger gas-guzzler than ever. Nixon gave them too much credit for statesmanship.

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