

editorial opinion

Who should initiate local tax reforms?

For tax purposes, consider the American middle class as one huge animal with a serious intestinal problem — a bellyful of parasites. And right now some of those "guests" are hungry. It's the annual feeding time, and the "host" animal is expected to provide. Thus the local bureaucracy is sustained.

For years the host animal — the taxpayer — put up with the internal bite. It was protection money paid to guard the good life.

But these days the deal has soured. The tax bite has become too big while the services rendered have declined or at best stayed the same. In Farmington Hills, for example, assessments of homes in-

creased on an average of 20 percent over last year. The taxpayers are angry. A stroll through the Farmington Hills City Hall confirmed this. Last Monday, dozens of irate homeowners were lined up in the lobby waiting for hearings on their assessment hikes. People were tense and frustrated.

There's a widespread belief that homes in Farmington Hills and other suburbs are assessed at more than 50 percent of their current market value.

Property tax assessors and other bureaucrats scream about inflation and state-mandated assessment procedures. Legislation, some assessors tell us, is the only way to lower taxes.

IN THE END the bureaucrats usually win. Taxpayers suffer the bigger bite or lose their homes. This is the good life?

Will tax relief ever come to the great American middle class?

There are some hopeful signs. Lately there have been tax-reform rumblings. Perhaps new legislation is the answer — not a loophole-laden device like the 1978 Headlee amendment, but an entire overhaul of tax systems at all levels.

Whatever the solutions, the local elected officials should be in the forefront of the movements. It's simply a matter of the guests improving conditions for the hosts so that both may survive.

THERE'S REAL trouble ahead if local officials fail to address the problem.

"They're pricing people right out of the market," said one frustrated homeowner during last Monday's assessment hearings. "I'm an attorney and I haven't had a real estate closing in six months. I used to do 30 or 40 a year."

When people get "priced out of the market" in Farmington Hills, that means that the host animal has died for local tax purposes.

And for the bureaucrats, that would be a fate worse than Headlee or Tisch.



Chamber acts like Young

As any schoolchild knows, "You can't have your cake and eat it, too."

But sometimes adults forget those elementary lessons. Take the grownups at the North Oakland Chamber of Commerce, whose board recently passed two resolutions:

First, it supported "the Citizens for Regional Water and Sewer System petition drive chaired by George W. Kuhn, Oakland County drain commissioner."

Second, it favored Oakland's "withdrawing from SEMTA," the regional transportation authority.

Detroit Mayor Coleman Young would take exactly the opposite view. He would oppose regionalizing the water and sewer system and splitting apart the regional transportation system. And he would be just as inconsistent.

THERE ARE SOME services just too extensive for one city or county to perform. They are best performed by a multi-county or regional agency.

Planning freeways is a regional job. Controlling auto emissions and air pollution is another. Even the most fervent worshippers at the shrine of "grass roots" government must recognize that regional jobs require regional agencies.

Kuhn and friends are proposing creation of a regional body in the water and sewer field. What we have now is up to 100 communities buying services from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, paying whatever Detroit wants to charge, and cringing as the Detroit-run sewage treatment plant continues to break down and pollute Lake Erie.

And so, under Kuhn's chairmanship, a bunch of the customer local governments have started a petition drive to change state law. What they propose would not expropriate anything from Detroit but would set up a regional council to oversee a regional service.

WE ARE BETTER off in the public transportation field. Since 1967, we have had a seven-county Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority at work.

It has bought out all the failing private bus companies, consolidated bus service in the suburbs, bought hundreds of new buses and helped bankrupt community dial-a-ride services.

SEMTA is negotiating acquisition of the Detroit Department of Transportation, in order to unify the system.

And it has passed a cautious, conservative 1990 plan calling for more buses, improved commuter rail service and a Woodward Avenue light rail rapid transit line.

Having a SEMTA makes such elemental good sense that it's hard to imagine anyone trying to wreck it by pulling out one-fourth of the region's population.

THIS TALK of Oakland's withdrawing from SEMTA is partly a game and partly serious.

Some folks believe they have to threaten to kick apart the system in order to get the SEMTA board's attention. Others are so paranoid about a regional agency that they would just as soon wreck it as look at it.

Turn Coleman Young inside out and you have the North Oakland Chamber of Commerce — favoring regionalism with one hand and fighting it with the other.

If you want to meet 21st century problems with 21st century tools, then you should favor both SEMTA and the Kuhn plan (or something much like it).

In an adult world, you can't have your cake and eat it, too.



What to do when I'm gone

My wife was going away for a couple of days and made out a list of things I was supposed to do while she was gone.

The list was fairly extensive, because she was leaving me with the house, the kids and the dog.

First on the list was to clean up the house on Sunday because the cleaning woman was coming in on Monday.

Stupidly I asked, "If the cleaning woman is coming in on Monday to clean up the house, why should I clean up the house on Sunday?"

"Well," answered my wife, "you wouldn't want her to come into a dirty house, would you? She'd tell everyone that I wasn't a very good housekeeper."

I'm still not exactly sure why we needed the cleaning woman, if it were supposed to scrub the house first, except for public relations purposes.

NEXT ON the list was to wash the dog before I took it to the kennel.

I looked at her questioningly and said, "Why? The kennel is supposed to give her a haircut and spruce her up."

She answered that the dog was so dirty that the kennel probably wouldn't take her.

The next several items on the list concerned the care and feeding of the kids. Actually, there is really only one child who eats and sleeps at home regularly these days. The others are part-timers who seem to show up for meals at the end of the month when their allowances run out.

As she was going through a list of things I could prepare for dinner, Michael, 17, walked in and said, "Forget it, Mom. While you're away, it is either eat it, too."



eccentricities

Henry Hogan

Stouffer's or the Big Boy." He had experienced my cooking before.

She was a little upset because she had stocked the refrigerator, and we were probably going to let it all go to waste.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "At least we have something for the cleaning woman to do. She can eat up a storm."

THE LAST THINGS on the list were errands that she didn't have time to do herself before she left. It was obvious from the list that she hadn't had time for several months to do some of the things.

Her car needed a 1,000-mile checkup, but her car had 7,000 miles on it, of course, and the dealer is on the other side of town.

The Christmas tree lights which had to be returned were not from last Christmas.

I figured that it would take four or five days full time to do everything on the list.

It was then I realized why she was leaving town. If you are really organized and make lists, you must find some excuse to get someone else to do the items on the list, or else why make a list?

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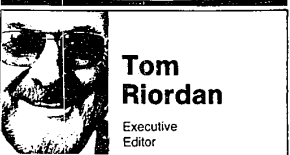
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Paper must be 'fresh'

If you love to read "fresh" newspapers, you'll understand what I'm about to write.

Whether it's my hometown favorite or the Detroit News, copies of newspapers I read must be unsullied to give me complete pleasure.

A paper must never have been opened or even fanned.

It even goes so far that when I extract a paper from a vending machine and I've opened the little door, I never take the top copy. I always go down to the second or third.

For many years I thought my penchant for fresh newspapers was odd. That is, until I read a book about Moe Berg. Old time baseball fans may recognize that name.

MOE, WHOSE GIVEN NAME was Morris, was a reserve catcher for the Boston Red Sox, Chicago White Sox and Cleveland Indians from 1923 to '37. Afterwards, he hung on as a bullpen catcher and coach with the Red Sox another six or eight years simply because he loved baseball so much.

That strange attachment to "a boy's game" drove his father wild. What infuriated the elder Berg was the fact Moe was no dummy. He had a law degree from Columbia University and spoke and wrote seven foreign languages — including Japanese.

Besides the joy he got from baseball, he was an insatiable reader. Moe loved to travel to other cities. He'd often buy half a dozen papers at the local newsstands.

ONCE BACK AT the hotel, he'd go to his room and carefully place his cache on a table or chair.

He'd read on and off for hours. Moe's penchant for fresh newspapers was well known among his teammates, who never dared so much as to touch his papers.

On one road trip he got a new roommate, a newcomer to the team. The fellow wanted to use a chair that held Moe's paper. The fellow casually tossed the stack onto a bed. Moe was out of the room at the time. When he got back and discovered what had happened, he bellowed at his bewildered teammate, "Don't ever touch my papers."

Actually, Moe was a mild-mannered guy and highly sought after by society hostesses for dinner parties. Moe was a handsome bachelor and brilliant conversationalist.

PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II, an all-star American League team, which included Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx, Jimmie Dykes, Lefty Grove et al — and Moe Berg — made a barnstorming tour of Japan.

Sports fans wondered why a utility catcher like Berg was selected.

It was more than 25 years after the war, following Berg's death in 1972, when the answer slipped out of Washington.

Berg's knowledge of Japan and its language prompted American intelligence people to worm Berg onto that 1932 all-star squad. He carried a small motion picture camera, apparently to catch his mates playing baseball. What he really shot were panoramic scenes of Tokyo harbor and industrial complexes.

Berg easily mingled with Japanese people, whom he casually questioned about their opinions of growing tensions in the Pacific. He chatted about military preparations, and who would ever think to suspect a baseball player of ulterior motives?

BERG'S EFFORTS WERE so productive he was quietly absorbed into this nation's intelligence network. During the war he carried out a variety of spy missions in Europe and South America.

The most bizarre incident, recounted in the fascinating book "Moe Berg: Athlete, Scholar, Spy" by Louis Kaufman, found Berg dressed as a German officer, walking into a munitions plant in Italy. He announced in flawless German to the manager that he had been dispatched from Berlin for an inspection.

Berg spent the day wandering around the facility. He was afforded every courtesy by the frightened Italians and obedient German military personnel assigned to watch their allies.

(If you're interested in the book, it can be found in the browsing room of the main branch of the Detroit Public Library. Its catalogue number is BB45338K1.)

What I remember best about Morris (Moe) Berg is that he and I share the same obsession — wanting only to read fresh newspapers.

What about you?



discover Michigan

Bill Stockwell

Did you know that large numbers of the original settlers of Livonia, Mich., came from Livonia, New York? These New York Livonians came from a principality of eastern Germany known by that name. The original name dates back to Russia.