

Monday's Commentary

Elderly fall victim to condominium craze

The old man cries.

His name is Joe and he's 80 years old.

"When I die, I want to leave with a clear conscience," he says in a quivering voice, choking back sobs. "If I go first, I wouldn't want my wife to worry about having a place to live."

The old man leans on his cane and shuffles slowly back to his seat. It's harder than usual for him to navigate. Tears fog his thick glasses, making them opaque.

Politicians are trying to help Joe and many other oldsters like him who are frightened. They're afraid of being moving targets — displaced persons — swept in a tidal wave which started as a ripple. Their fears are not unfounded.

Joe is among a crowd of senior citizens who leave their apartments Wednesday, despite the steady, dismal rain, to testify before the House Towns and Counties Committee in Southfield Parks and Recreation Building.

They manage to venture out, in a city which lacks adequate public transportation, to tell the committee of the devastation they face if their apartments are converted to condominiums they can't afford to buy.

WITH THE early trickle of conversions fast becoming a ground swell, older citizens on fixed incomes are waiting for what they dread will be the inevitable death knell to their rental units. They spend sleepless nights worrying. Or they have nightmares in which they hear the harsh words,

"Buy or get out?" But where will they go?

The politicians are there Wednesday. State Rep. John Bennett, D-Redford Township, and State Rep. Joseph Forbes and State Sen. Doug Ross explain the legislative bills they've introduced.

Bennett wants to stem the tide with a three-year moratorium on state approval to convert apartment buildings to condominiums. His proposals also require that 50 percent of the tenants agree to purchase condo units before conversion is permitted and that elderly tenants get lifetime leases.

The cornerstone of the Forbes-Ross bills is to provide lifetime lease protection at reasonable rental rates for seniors 62 or older if their apartment units are converted. The measures also call for loans to low and moderate-income families who want to be converted units and for condominium developers to cover their expenses incurred by the lifetime lease program.

But retirees and others on fixed incomes fear that if the bills pass, it will be too late for them. They're apprehensive that developers will rush to apply for conversions to circumvent the proposed legislation.

CONDOMINIUM fever is sweeping through Michigan, but perhaps more so in the Southfield area, where condos are sprouting like expensive mushrooms in the housing market. Other communities, such as Ann Arbor, have been hard hit.

Dr. Gregory Duboff, a 74-year-old medical specialist, has lived in an Ann Arbor Townhouse for 18



Jackie Klein

years. He's confronted with conversion. He calls it displacement.

"I'm suffering a loss of vision," he tells committee members. "I know where everything is in the place I'm living in now. If I'm forced to move, I'll have the same difficulty many aged persons have finding their way around."

"Older people feel they're no longer wanted where they're living. They suffer stress and anxiety. The young cope better. We need a holding action on condominium conversions to keep from being told 'Buy now or get out.'"

Henry Faigin, a retired school teacher, lived in Detroit for 30 years. He tells the committee he moved to a Southfield apartment three years ago, because he found it difficult to maintain his former home — afraid he would get a heart attack shoveling snow.

"WE'RE WILLING to pay rent in a quality apartment," he says. "But if it's converted, the plans and dreams for which we worked so hard will be frustrated. Conversions jeopardize human rights

and the freedom of choice.

"After paying hard earned money for rising rents, we're given notice to buy or leave. Landlords are selling depreciated properties for maximum profits and tenants suffer. If we could find another apartment, the rent would be sky high. And who's to say it wouldn't also be converted into a condominium?"

Condominium conversion is a social issue. It reduces choices and the right to the life style apartment dwellers enjoy. It means many independent seniors will be forced to move in with their children, which can create conflict and turmoil.

Substandard housing is being dumped on the market for as high as \$60,000, says an apartment tenant who lives in a deteriorating building in the process of conversion. Walls in the building are so thin, she claims, she can hear her next door neighbor sneeze. And the apartment, soon to be a condo, is poorly maintained.

Most seniors say they don't blame landlords for wanting to make money. But older persons are unwilling victims of the growing condo conversion trend. It's tough enough for them to dip into their skimpy incomes to pay frequent hikes in rents.

They've paid their taxes, worked hard and earned their keep. Why should they be plagued with anxiety when "forever" to them is only a few short years? And where is the "gray power" everyone talks about?

Ross, Forbes and Bennett are to be commended for caring about the moving targets, the displaced persons who need and deserve protection.

Class president must face voters at reunion

Few people, except those who were members of the glee club, really look forward to attending their class reunion. My 10-year reunion this June, and I'm doing my damndest to stay out of sight of the organizing committee.

You fear everyone else from the graduating class is president of a multi-national corporation, while you're still being denied a Sears credit card.

People who weren't well-known in school figure they'll be ignored at the reunion. And the people who were well-known figure everyone still hates them for being popular.

I dunno, somehow I'd hoped to be a bit more mature and assured when I made my triumphant return. Ten years ago I was writing smartass columns for the Warren Observer high school paper. Today I'm doing the same for the Observer & Eccentric. No regrets, it just sounds like the plot line of an one-act existential play.

Besides, people you went to high school invariably remember only the most embarrassing aspects of your past.

Stuff like:

"Boy, remember between junior and senior year when you got a job at that cafeteria and gained 25 lbs? One minute you were so skinny, the next time we saw you you were a blimp."

It's comments like that that made you want to stick a spiral notebook up the guy's nose when you sat across from him in homeroom.

Or they'll bring up the time you drank too much at the drive-in and recycled your Cold Duck in the back seat of somebody's Dodge Polara and on the sleeve of a coat that girl borrowed from her mother.

They'll remind me of my 1964 prediction that the Dave Clark Five would be a much bigger rock and roll group than the Beatles. Sorry, I still maintain "Glad All Over" is a better song than "Love Me Do."

They'll retell those old stories about teachers we gave nervous breakdowns, and probably ask me to do the voice of Hawkeye, the senile sister who claimed she could smell a Jujube or stick of Juicyfruit a mile away. And I'll probably oblige them to impress the same women I tried to entertain, with little success, when I was in high school.



Craig Piechura

I have this fantasy that everyone who was labeled a "nurd" in high school will be tremendously witty and fashionable, while everyone you figured had it made won't be able to attend, because they're spending the summer at the Detroit House of Correction.

Likewise, I figure those girls we dropped our pencils over will be wearing a floral print house dress, curlers and nylon anklets that curl up just below their verose veins. And the guy who's only skill seemed to be burping on command will be

working on advanced micro-chip technology at MIT.

I must confess I was senior class president, a post I won in a protest vote against the head nud's hand-picked candidate. The only major piece of legislation passed during my term of office was an executive order rescinding a school ban on blue jeans.

I would never have accepted the presidency if I knew it was a lifetime post. Everywhere I run across an old classmate in a shopping mall, I get asked when the class reunion will be held. I tell them to listen to the radio for the announcement, too embarrassed to admit I'm shirking my academic duty by not planning the get-together.

Some of the cheerleaders took up the slack. But they're having trouble contacting people, because they're only using the East area phone directory. So, if you are within the sound of this page, there's a St. Ann-Warren High class of 1970 reunion on June 13. There, I've done my part.

I'll go to the reunion. But so help me, the first guy who calls me Clark Kent gets a gusher of recycled Cold Duck all over his three-piece suit.

from our readers

Department head protests today's educational quality

Editor:

I read the recent stories about the music programs in the Farmington Public Schools and experienced an increased adrenal flow and elevated heartbeat.

I was ecstatic. It is indeed heartening to know that there are parents who are still concerned about high artistic and academic standards. Perhaps our culture isn't yet quite as dead as it superficially appears.

The thought and resultant action which Concerned Parents for Music has taken is vital if the schools in Farmington are to offer a superior education in all areas of instruction.

What this group has shown to be true in the music program is, to some extent, true in other curricula as well. And if school enrollments take the five- or six-year projected plunge, the situation can only worsen.

It is conceivable that many teachers, as some already are, will be teaching subject matter that they have never before taught, even though they are certified to teach it.

It is likewise possible that a move to a different grade level, even though they might teach the same subject matter, will prove traumatic to teachers and their students, because certain people are more suited to work with one age level than another.

Imagine a 20-year veteran of the high school English classroom suddenly teaching music origin and insertion and the Krebs cycle in a biology classroom.

The last time I wrote the names Krebs, however he is, was in 1963 on zoology examination, and I am certified to teach natural science. Am I,

however, qualified? The question is absurd.

There is an increasing problem in the 20th century technological society. More and more systems are created to handle the ever increasing complexity of living.

Whereas the original intent of any system may be good or well-intentioned, through time, it is the system as system that alone is important. Those that it was meant to serve are forgotten.

In fact, the system can control those who once controlled it. Has this happened in education? Are the children (the ones for whom education is supposed to exist), the teachers, the administrators being forced into a Brave New World society without thought or concern for how it has happened or why it is happening?

The possibility is chilling. A few years ago, an administrator was quoted as saying "It's the room that counts." I think and hope this was said in jest, but some of the current trends in staffing give it an air of reality.

When a great, or even good, teacher comes to a school system, I suppose he or she doesn't ultimately need a room at all. When are educators going to recognize that it is the teacher who does matter, that it is the teacher who literally shapes destinies?

Are school systems facing rheumatoid, hoary-headed, senile, obsolete faculties (I think the euphemism for this is tenure)? Is there not a better way to ensure faculty stability quality than mere length of service?

In two decades many of us have

watched, with decided inclination to vomit, the erosion of beliefs, of values, of standards, of something like culture.

We have seen open classrooms; we have heard products of the new math count "one, two, four, we have read 'the ran cat' from students who were trained in new grammar.

They are gone — almost. Now we smile, but not broadly, because we are dealing with a yet more grim problem.

Editor:

I read the original and the follow-up story (April 7) by Mary Gilewek on the requirements for graduation from the Farmington School system. I attended the meeting chaired by Dick Levinson and the coverage of that meeting by Ms. Gilewek.

Of course, no culture can or should remain absolutely static because it will die. But there are within any culture, universal, unchanging truths which become traditions of the next culture.

There can be little doubt that to be cultured, in the sense that Matthew Arnold used the word a century ago, an individual should know and appreciate art, music, literature, philosophy, history, science, mathematics and, yes, a practical trade, one at which he is an expert.

If this is ever to be realized, the good and great teachers must be left alone to do what they do so well — inspire, create, shape the culture of the next generation.

Let us recognize, and be done with it once and for all, that there are good teachers and that we can identify what their "goodness" is.

Let us praise them, and let us also keep them where their goodness infects to plague proportions, so that the next generation will be sick to near death

with some of the internal qualities which are rapidly disappearing from this generation — stability, peace and joy.

And is that impossible? If you think it is, if you think this all sounds like a monstrous generality, recall that certain teacher in your life who —

Praise to you parents from a — what else — teacher.

MICHAEL RASMUSSEN, chairman, English Department North Farmington

Resident surprised at school standards

Editor:

I was surprised to learn that we have let our school system slip to such a level that students graduating from the system aren't required to take any courses in any of the humanities.

In fact, I was appalled at the minimum levels required for graduation. I support, as a minimum, the position

taken by Mr. Geiger. I would appreciate follow-up stories on this subject by Ms. Gilewek. They would help to keep informed those concerned parents who are unable to attend the meetings.

If the recent increase in my tax assessment is any indication of the mon-

ies available to the system, perhaps we can return to the eight-hour day and also get some other areas covered in an effort to raise requirements.

Benjamin Decooke, Farmington Hills

Deja vu on the riverfront

It is amazing how long it takes a good idea to become reality.

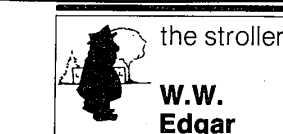
This came to mind the other morning when The Stroller looked up his morning newspaper and learned that another plan is afoot to build a series of con-

dominiums along the Detroit River close by the civic center to match another that is planned between the two big arenas and the Ambassador Bridge. Both plans, it was said, are designed to entice the people who rushed to the suburbs in the past decade or two to come back to the inner city and help to save it.

To the younger generation, this may sound like a new idea. But to the old timers it is just the rebirth of an idea that was discussed several decades ago when the Lodge Expressway was opened to the public.

As he read of the latest plans, The Stroller couldn't help recalling a visit he had with the late Albert E. Cobo, then the mayor of the city of Detroit.

Standing at the window of his office high atop the City County Building we looked at the concrete ribbon that stretched to the north and, rather kiddingly, it was mentioned that the folks now could come down shopping much



the stroller

W.W. Edgar

quicker than before. When he heard those words "Little Al," as he was affectionately known, turned and answered, "And they can get out of the city just as fast. We'll have to take means to stop that."

With that he turned and looked at the Detroit River as it flowed quietly on its way to Lake Erie, and remarked, "This would be a grand place to erect apartment houses (there were no condominiums in those days). Just imagine, sitting in your living room and looking into a foreign country. More than that, wouldn't it be something out of this world to sit in your own home and watch the boats from foreign countries pass in review most every month of the year?"

"Little Al" was so wrapped up with the idea that he was about to start a movement that would have a two-fold

effect. It not only would keep people in the city instead of rushing to the suburbs, but it would help to beautify the river front.

Unfortunately, he died before his term of office was finished and the idea, apparently, died with him. Now it is being resurrected with hopes that it will become a reality.

Until his death Mayor Cobo had reason to be disturbed about the rush to the suburbs. People were moving out in droves and it was during that rush that the city of Livonia came into being just as Canton is today.

Now, after all these years, they are attempting to turn the tide and bring some of the people back to the river front.

It was "Little Al's" idea, but it has taken a quarter of a century to the support that may bring it about.

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