

Opinion

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Secrets! Officials scheme to shut out public

THERE'S LITTLE chance the Michigan Legislature will pass either of the two amendments proposed by Rep. Willis Bullard to weaken the state's Open Meetings Act. Why then even write about them?

Because in order to live with the Open Meetings Act, local government officials must consciously decide they want to live with them. If our local officials on school boards, college boards, county boards, city councils, township boards and village councils make the conscious decision to operate in the sunshine, it is easy. But if they entertain the anti-social notion of operating in secrecy, then they will continually be unhappy and constantly will plot ways of holding secret meetings.

THE WEAKENING amendments by Bullard, R-Milford Township, have some support from the State Bar Association and the Michigan Townships Association, we are told. More's the pity.

House Bill 4849 would blow a giant hole into the brief list of purposes for which local governments may hold closed meetings.

The existing OMA allows boards to meet in closed session with an attorney regarding strategy in connection with a specific, pending lawsuit. Bullard's amendment would allow a secret meeting if there were "threatened" litigation.

Those who have attended local government meetings know well that when there is a hot issue, someone is always threatening to file suit. Whether the issue be a school closing, a zoning change, liquor licenses or even a video games ordinance, some hothead will threaten to go to court.

That is just what the backers of HB 4849 are relying on. The moment anyone breathes the word "sue," however empty the threat, they want to close the governmental board meeting and discuss everything in secret.

That's dead wrong. The existing law provides plenty of chance for a strategy

session when there is an actual lawsuit. Indeed, we should point out that the existing law permits a closed meeting but doesn't require closing it. Governing boards are supposed to think first before closing a meeting, not bang the doors shut at the first hint of a lawsuit.

HOUSE BILL 4850 would set up conditions under which a government board could meet in a private residence. It provides for published notice of such a meeting. On paper, it looks almost good. But then we examine the existing law and find that governmental meetings are to be held "in a place available to the general public." What this crippling amendment would do is allow meetings in someone's house. That's not the place for a governmental body to meet.

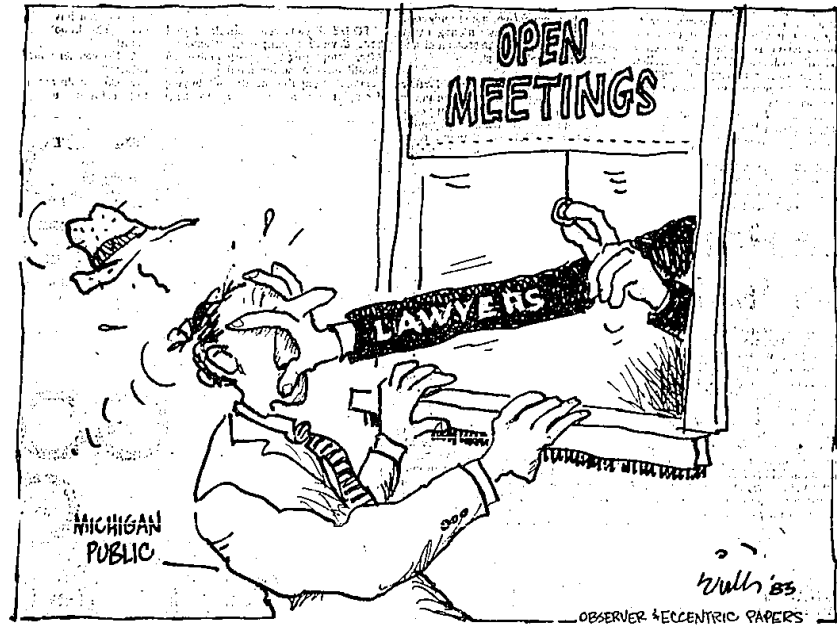
Virtually every governing board in Michigan has some kind of public place to meet in — an office, a school, the volunteer fire department hall. They have space for at least small crowds.

They are on main roads. They have parking space outside, often lighted. They are places generally known to the public. The doors are open and a citizen can simply walk in. Inside, there is sufficient seating. If the meeting room is of recent vintage, there are ramps for wheelchairs.

None of those factors is necessarily present when a meeting is held in a private residence. Indeed, it seems fair to suggest that the reason politicians would want to hold a meeting in a private residence is to discourage public attendance.

Shame on the supporters of HB 4849 and 4850 for even thinking about more governmental secrecy. Rather than plotting ways to shut the public out of public business, they need to make a New Year's resolution to accept emotionally, as well as to obey, the existing Open Meetings Act.

The public's business ought to be done in public.



Year of big changes ahead

A NEW YEAR is always a time for beginnings and endings. Changes are even more striking this year.

The end of the football season last weekend was especially disappointing with both the Detroit Lions and Michigan Wolverines losing close games. But there are more important transitions with the coming of the new year. Consider:

- The most important is the breakup of the Bell system, effective Sunday. American Telephone & Telegraph is the largest company ever to be divested.

Immediately, it appears that local rates will increase while long distance rates will go down. Phones now can be purchased instead of leased.

In the years ahead, we may look back at the divestiture and recognize that it ushered in a new era of communications.

- On Sunday, Gov. James Blanchard completed his first year in office. It was a tumultuous year, marked by economic recovery and unrest among voters.

A temporary increase in the state income tax rate from 4.6 percent to 6.35 percent was partly responsible for both. An unsuccessful recall campaign of Blanchard was led by people residing in Oakland and Wayne counties. Sens. Philip Mastin, representing Rochester and Avon Township, and David Serotkin of Macomb County were recalled.



Nick Sharkey

It appears likely another suburban senator, Patrick McCollough, will face a recall election. He represents Garden City. Signatures on recall petitions have been filed and they are being checked.

When will the recall fever in the suburbs subside?

- On Monday, Coleman Young completed his 10th year as mayor of Detroit.

At his inaugural Young did not win any suburban friends when he said, "I issue an open warning now to all dope pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit. Hit Eight Mile Road. Hit the road."

For those residing north of Eight Mile and west of Telegraph, it sounded like an ominous warning. And in his first few years as mayor, Young did little to soften what many considered to be an anti-suburban bias on the water system, public transit and state aid to the city.

But in the past year, Young's stance has softened. In 1983 he appeared before a

group of Oakland County business leaders in Troy and said, "I have come across Eight Mile bearing an olive branch."

"What's good for the city of Detroit is good for its suburbs," he continued. "And what's good for the suburbs is good for Detroit. I suggest that we must exist together."

Will this spirit of cooperation continue?

- For the second time in two elections, voters in 1984 will face new legislative district lines. A new reapportionment plan, recently approved by the legislature goes into effect April 1.

The biggest change affects the state Senate districts of Robert Geake, R-Northville, and McCollough, D-Deerborn. Eleven square miles of strongly Republican Livonia will be put into McCollough's district.

McCollough got off the best line about the changes: "You know, these reapportionment plans are as permanent as April snow."

These transitions do not take into account that we are beginning the year named in the title of George Orwell's famous novel, "1984."

Our 1984 will be far different from what Orwell predicted, but just as interesting.

Have a happy new year.

MEA's loud pupils flunked their civics

BIG LOSERS in the November recall campaigns of two state senators were the leaders and members of the Michigan Education Association.

MEA was one of the biggest backers of Philip O. Mastin of Pontiac and David Serotkin of Mt. Clemens as they spent \$5 or \$10 to save their necks for every \$1 spent by the recall advocates.

My purpose in bringing up this economic fact of politics is the recollection that public education is deteriorating. The presidential commission report entitled "A Nation at Risk" said the current generation is the first in history which can be said to be less well educated than its parents.

One can believe it after listening to the recall advocates — an unpleasant task at which I have spent many hours. And now their teachers are being punished.

THE FIRST target of the recall effort was to be Gov. James J. Blanchard, who successfully advocated a 1.75 percent increase in the state's personal income tax.

The Blanchard petitions have been bogged down in the legal process, but suppose a Blanchard recall were successful. Who would become governor?

Martha Griffith, that's who. The hatchet-tongued lieutenant governor is a bigger spender than Blanchard ever thought of being. She was with Blanchard all the way. Her Lansing apartment mate is Agnes Mary Mansour, the would-be free spending director of the Department of Social Services.

Someone didn't teach the recall people very much about state government back in school.

THE OVERWHELMING impression one gets from listening to recall advocates is that they are a generation of television watchers, not readers.

In revealing their meager knowledge of government, they quote candidate Blanchard's TV commercials from the 1982 campaign and come up with the erroneous



Tim Richard

notion that Blanchard wouldn't raise taxes.

Newspaper readers know differently — and know better. Blanchard was forthright that it would take new revenue to solve the state's fiscal problems. The only persons who can say Blanchard misled them are non-readers.

Usually, social studies and English teachers advise students to read periodicals to keep up on current events. Some teachers even list top-notch publications. I've never known, however, a teacher to advise students to watch TV commercials to learn about candidates.

So the current generation of MEA member teachers must be falling down on the job. If they had been doing a good job of teaching, the recall elections might never have taken place.

IT WAS SAD, when I covered the anti-tax rally in front of the State Capitol, to ask demonstrators if they had been active in the 1982 campaign and hear, time after time, they had never been active in politics.

It was sad to hear people who said they voted for Blanchard in 1982 profess surprise in 1983 that he was advocating a tax hike.

It was sad to remember how many League of Women Voters debates my colleagues and I have covered where hardly a dozen people were in the audience.

It was sad to see people joining expensive — not only to the state but to themselves — recall campaigns when they could have read about, supported and voted for the people they wanted to send to Lansing by paying attention at the beginning.

A VARIETY of experts, predictors, analysts and prognosticators are saying 1984 will be a good year economically. We hope so.

It will be a banner year newswise, of course. Each year is. And, except for the Watergate era, each new year's news seems more interesting than last year's. Of course, we'll miss some of the characters of 1983, the ones we won't have to kick around anymore.

We'll miss James Watts, who was better at relieving the tedium of government watching than three situation comedies. We'll miss a parcel of Gov. Blanchard's it-seemed-like-a-good-idea-at-the-time political appointments: chief of staff Tom Lewand, press secretary Sue Carter and worker's comp chairman Cliff Allo. We'll miss the debate over Blanchard's appointment of ex-Sister Mary Agnes Mansour as welfare department director and over the suitability for office of ex-Senators Philip Mastin and David Serotkin.

BUT WE'LL still have the state personal income tax increase and various reactions to it to chew on. We'll still have recall campaigns, Democratic-Republican battling in the state Legislature, Wayne County Executive William Lucas and the Wayne County Commission battling over what constitutes effective government, the mass transit wrangle, campaigns against drunk driving, concern over police



Bob Wisler

caution in car chases and domestic arguments, nuclear arms protests, power plant economic follies, unemployment, car company failures and successes, crime, corruption and examples of man's humanity as well as inhumanity to fellow man.

The Alice-in-Wonderland kingdom of government and politics will provide us with most of our amusements and concerns.

Politically it should be a potent year. Gov. Blanchard, who was liked by at least 50 percent of the voting public when he was elected in November 1982, couldn't be elected today to succeed recalled senators Mastin or Serotkin and might have trouble being elected to local office in his hometown of Pleasant Ridge.

Whether or not the governor can overcome the negative publicity, inept handling of staff matters and inability to convince the public of a need for a tax increase, remains to be seen. Don't bet on it.

SOME OF those who stood behind Blanchard on the tax increase may find

themselves standing outside of the Capitol building as recall campaigns continue. But now that the lust for revenge has been somewhat sated, the recall enthusiasm should fade, especially in areas where legislators have more of a power base and loyal following than Serotkin or Mastin enjoyed. Perhaps Dearborn Democrat Pat McCollough will be recalled, but after him recall fever should subside.

Dick Headlee, the defeated candidate for governor, still will make noise but look for his running mate in the last election, ex-Supreme Court Justice Tom Brennan, to emerge as a Blanchard critic and the man who could easily become the next Republican gubernatorial nominee. He's already lining up his ducks.

With the next election three years away, however, the battle over Carl Levin's seat in the U.S. Senate — to be decided in November — will provide the most interest in a state office. Ex-astronaut Jack Louisa was talked into returning to native Michigan from outer space, Texas and the U.S. Marines by Republican bigwigs who sorely need a candidate to run against Levin.

Louisa has already been labelled a carpetbagger by the GOP faction backing conservative James Dunn, an announced candidate for the Republican nomination. Can an All-American boy, Whooties-cater-like Jack, overcome the advantage of Dunn's money and experience? Bet on it.