

Opinion

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The greening of street signs

STREET SIGNS. Think about them.

These days, all of them seem to be green.

Time was, a man could tell what town he was in just by glancing up at a street sign. They were community identifiers, much the same as distinctive cooking or accented speech.

Movie makers who wanted to show a New York City setting had only to flash one of those familiar street signs (they were blue with white letters and had that distinctive bump on top containing the name of the intersecting street), and there would be instant recognition: New York, Big Town, Gotham.

Detroit's signs for the last 40 or so years were narrow white rectangles bordered in black with black letters.

BUT ALL THIS is changing. New York, which tried different colors for each borough after dumping the bump-on-top signs in the early 1980s, is in the process of putting up new signs. Color: green with white letters throughout the city.

And during the last decade, Detroit has been steadily replacing its street signs as funds and manpower have allowed. Color: green again. The first greens appeared in a wide corridor bounded by Van Dyke on the east and Livernois on the west.

Now, one must travel to the far east or west sides of the city to find the few remaining white ones.



Tom Baer

IN CHICAGO, which was known for years by its black-on-yellow street signs, it'll soon be down with the yellows and up with the greens. The greens, in fact, seem to be sweeping just about every town you can figure: Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, St. Louis, Boston, Buffalo, Minneapolis, Syracuse, Louisville.

If they're not in your town now, you can be sure they will be soon.

The suburbs aren't immune to the invasion. Most of the bigger 'burbs — Livonia, Warren and Farmington Hills come to mind — have sported the greens for at least 10 years.

Royal Oak, which had white signs with raised black letters, recently changed over: Another town gone green.

Berkley seems to be a rare holdout with its light blues.

STREET SIGN men first act puzzled at questions about their signs. Few people ever ask why. Once they understand the question, they usually make vague statements about federal government "safety standards" requiring green signs with white letters.

So it's the federal government in back of all this sign standardization! Might have guessed.

"The reflection of white against green is greater than with other color schemes," said an employee of New York City's Signs and Signals Division. "Tests have proved this. Safety is the big reason we're changing."

Maybe so. They can ask us to tolerate anything in the name of safety. Still, some independent, sensitive souls must view the greening of American street signs the same way they'd look upon airline food or interstate scenery or subdivisions out of cookie cutters from here to Lake Michigan.

They're dull, drab — and green.

discover Michigan

by Bill Stockwell

DID YOU know that the charming little town of Clarkston, in northern Oakland County, was originally a trading post? Founded by Jeremiah Clark, it got back to the mid-1800s and never has had its name changed.

DID YOU know that the city of Warren is as old as the state itself, going back to April 3, 1837? For a while it was known as Alba, then renamed Alba in 1838. But only 11 months later, its name was changed to Warren.

'Tax revolt' faded in suburbs Aug. 7

WHAT HAPPENED to the tax revolt?

Last year several groups were running recall campaigns against Democratic state senators who voted for the temporary increase in the state personal income tax. Gov. Blanchard was as popular as parvo virus.

Democratic legislators who voted for the increase were scurrying for cover. Republicans were baying to the heavens about the need for giving taxpayers a break.

Political wisdom would seemingly dictate hunkering down and avoiding bringing up the mere mention of taxes.

And yet, this summer we had several local governments asking voters to take on more of a tax load.

TAXPAYERS should have stuffed their ballots down the throats of anyone with enough gall to ask for voter approval of a tax package, right?

Well, it didn't work out that way. In Oakland County, voters approved renewal of a .035-mill property tax to maintain and operate parks. Wayne County voters approved continuation of a one-mill operating levy. Detroit residents approved a library tax. Livonia voters approved a new one-mill tax to support its library system. Southfield voters authorized a one-mill levy to maintain roads.

OF COURSE, the approvals show the wisdom of the governmental leaders who opted to put their money issues on the August primary ballot instead of the November general election ballot when more voters would be participating.

And it may be that voters generally felt that with a slight decrease in the state tax coming up (the temporary increase approved last year will decrease again Sept. 1), they could afford something for local or county government.

But it's doubtful that entered into the thinking. Perhaps residents now trust local government more than state government, more after the tax flap over the income



Bob Wisler

tax hike. Or perhaps more appropriately, voters want to be able to decide for themselves what tax issues they will support. They want to be able to say when their taxes will be raised rather than having a legislative body tell them.

TO THE CREDIT of the citizenry in Oakland County, Wayne County, Livonia and Southfield, residents are willing to pay for services they deem essential to the well-being of their communities.

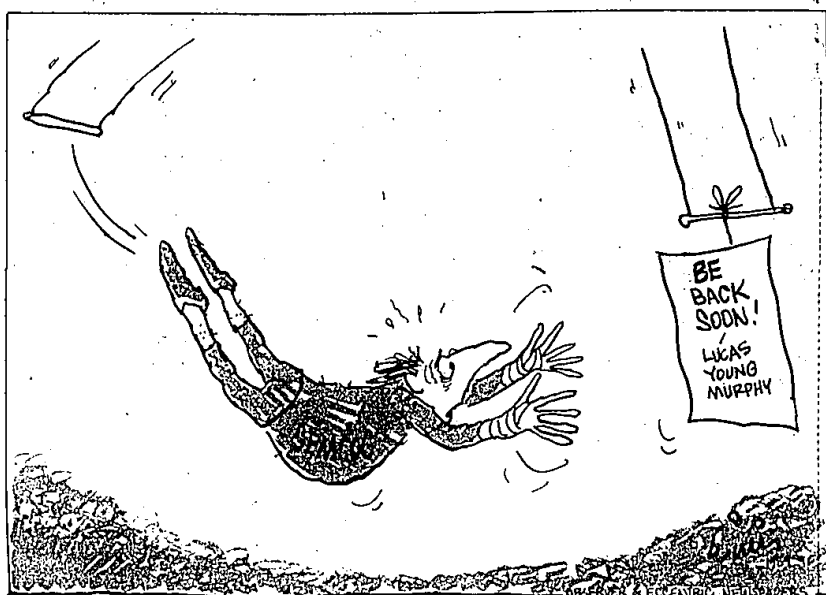
We have long felt that most residents would gladly pay for fire protection, police protection and garbage pickup — but libraries, roads, parks and county services have seemed to be low-priority items with most voters.

The voters proved the cynics wrong, however. There is more to life than sitting on our own turf and jealously guarding our prerogatives, property and pocketbooks.

And the difference between the methods employed to win local approval of the tax issue and the slim-beam method employed to win the state tax increase should be obvious.

The tax approvals came after fairly good campaigns by citizen groups or by governments, or in some cases by a combination of those. The proponents laid it on the line: This is what we need if we are going to have parks, libraries, roads, etc.

There was time to reason, to think, to argue for or against. The voters in Oakland and Wayne County have shown the politicians that they can be counted on to support government if the facts are favorable and the opportunity to reason is present.



'Big 4' makes a poor forum

THE ANNOUNCEMENT came out in June as if it were something good.

The mayor of Detroit, the Wayne County executive, the Oakland County executive and the chairman of the Macomb County Board of Commissioners had been a series of meetings to discuss matters of common interest.

Even at the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, sage leaders nodded approval.

They shouldn't have. Meetings of the "big four" of local politics are a terrible idea and ought to be discontinued.

WE ALREADY have a working agency for achieving regional cooperation. It is the aforementioned Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. SEMCOG is recognized by state and federal authorities as the official seven-county planning agency for highways, transportation, housing, water, recreation and the rest.

Any of the 400 or so governmental units in the region may join SEMCOG, and 130-plus already have. But the meetings of the "big four" systematically will exclude 396 units of government. That's a poor way to achieve regional cooperation.

In a way, SEMCOG meetings lack fire because big city, suburban and rural politicians behave civilly to each other. There is none of the acrimonious name-calling which occurs when politicians retreat be-



Tim Richard

hind their own boundaries.

Indeed, part of the ill feeling between Detroit and the outlying communities is due to the fact that, in his 11 years as mayor of Detroit, Coleman A. Young, though an official SEMCOG delegate, has never attended a meeting.

DANIEL T. MURPHY, the Oakland County executive, used to be xenophobic about the folks south of Eight Mile Road. No more. Murphy got involved in SEMCOG in the late 1970s, learned to rub shoulders with neighboring politicians and cleaned up his own act.

Indeed, Murphy even did a stint as chairman of SEMCOG. He learned to think regionally. Young still hasn't learned that lesson.

William Lucas, Wayne County executive since 1983, attended a couple of SEMCOG meetings but hasn't been seen since. Lucas likes to make speeches to friendly audiences, but he hates an arena where someone might argue with him. Lucas ran away from all but a couple of debates

when he was seeking the office. He won't meet with the Wayne County Commission, and his program suffers for it.

And if Lucas now quits attending SEMCOG meetings in order to meet with the "big four," well, regional cooperation will suffer.

MACOMB COUNTY isn't even a member of SEMCOG and hasn't been since about 1972. These rednecked louts have a bad attitude toward regional cooperation, so perhaps it is just as well they don't show up in polite society.

It is a mockery of the principles of regional planning, however, for Macomb's county board chairman to meet with other top leaders. Macomb hasn't paid its SEMCOG dues. It deserves ostracism until it does.

Sorry we can't report what goes on at those meetings of the "big four." They are not announced in advance and are not subject to the state Open Meetings Act.

SEMCOG's meetings are subject to the Open Meetings Act. There is one at 2 p.m. Friday in Livingston County Courthouse, Howell.

The "big four" has yet another failing. It is a good ol' boys club. Unlike SEMCOG, which has a goodly number of women delegates, executive committee members, officers and staff members, the "big four" is an all-male domain.

Slowly, sex ed is accepted

Sandra Armbruster

Dr. Charles Stafford, associate superintendent for curriculum in Wayne-Westland, remembers attending some of the early parent meetings in the Livonia district, where she lived at the time. Parents would get up and loudly promise that no one was going to teach their kids about sex.

Unfortunately, no one else taught them either.

EVENTUALLY, the state passed legislation permitting not only sex education, but birth control education, too.

Now committees, such as the 18-member panel in Bloomfield Hills, discuss what will be taught, by whom and how. The committees consist of parents and students as well as educators. Information about the course is made available to parents.

Wayne-Westland district parents have become more comfortable with the subject. When the school board this summer approved high school birth control education classes, no parent commented on the project.

"It takes time. Education and the media help," Stafford said.

HOPEFULLY, birth control information will be offered in all districts someday.

"The amount of naivete is surprising," said Mark Gutman, director of student services in the Garden City school district. His district runs a program for high school girls who become pregnant. Participants are Wayne-Westland, Cherry Hill, Crestwood, Dearborn, Livonia, Plymouth-Canton, Redford Union, South Redford and Romulus school districts.

There were 44 in last year's program, an average year, Gutman said.

THE ACTUAL number who become pregnant during school is hard to determine, said Wayne-Westland's Edwards. Many girls leave home to live with relatives out-of-state for six months or so.

"I firmly believe — and statistics show — that actual pregnancies go down," Edwards said. "Students are less active, have more knowledge they have."

"And we don't talk about abortion as a form of birth control. We tell students, 'When we decide to have intercourse, it's wise to take precautions if you don't want a child.'"

Good advice. At the 10 years from now, birth control education will be considered commonplace, not just progressive.