

Opinion

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Downtown inn a compelling idea

AN UPSCALE budget inn is exactly what Downtown Farmington needs to serve as a catalyst for a rejuvenated central business district.

So says Christopher Waczyn, planning consultant to the Downtown Farmington Development Committee (DFDC).

But is it? That depends. With establishment of a Downtown Development Authority in the offing, talk of a small European-style inn as a centerpiece to central business district improvements has intensified.

Articulate and well respected, Waczyn maintains that such an inn — in the mid-range and offering executive suites for business meetings — could help draw an upscale restaurant downtown. And many DFDC supporters agree — at least conceptually.

FROM THIS vantage point, a well-managed, architecturally compatible inn probably could serve as a downtown anchor — and probably could help draw upscale restaurants nearby.

But that's not to say such an inn is pivotal to bringing upscale dining to Downtown Farmington. It certainly shouldn't be.

Although DDA project manager Page Kurtz would welcome a small hotel in Rochester, she said she didn't "think it's critical to a downtown's success."

And even with an upscale inn, a downtown isn't automatically going to become a tourist haven. But, says Kurtz, "What a centrally located hotel — with quality restaurants and quality shopping nearby — might do to convince the business person who's going to stay for an extended period to bring his or her spouse and family."

An upscale inn undoubtedly would boost foot traffic in Downtown Farmington. And that should delight merchants. As Larry Lemcher, a major downtown property owner, aptly put it: "People like to be where the action is."

AN UPSCALE inn also could provide a place to hold a breakfast meeting. As it is, downtown business folks have to look elsewhere along Grand River, to the Botsford Inn or the Holiday Inn in Farmington Hills, for a meeting room large enough.

Before any decision is made on pursuing a downtown inn, however, several pointed questions demand answering.

Topping the list is location. Where would you put an inn of, say, 65 rooms? Grand River or Farmington Road would be a natural location. A prime site appears to be a vacant parcel on Farmington Road, south of Alta Loma. But is there enough land? Would a renovation elsewhere be more practical?

Then there's the question of what an inn should look like. Could it be compatible with a downtown where some buildings date back more than 70 years.

THE LOOK of the Holly Hotel in Downtown Holly or the Mayflower Hotel in Downtown Plymouth would fit the bill nicely. It's too bad Orrin Weston didn't have the foresight 150 years ago to build what was to become the Botsford Inn farther north along the Old Post Road, near today's Grand River and Farmington Road.

There's also the question of whether a major hotelier would be willing to put up an inn that's architecturally sensitive. And there's the question of whether a smaller entrepreneur could afford the attention to detail necessary to achieve compatibility.

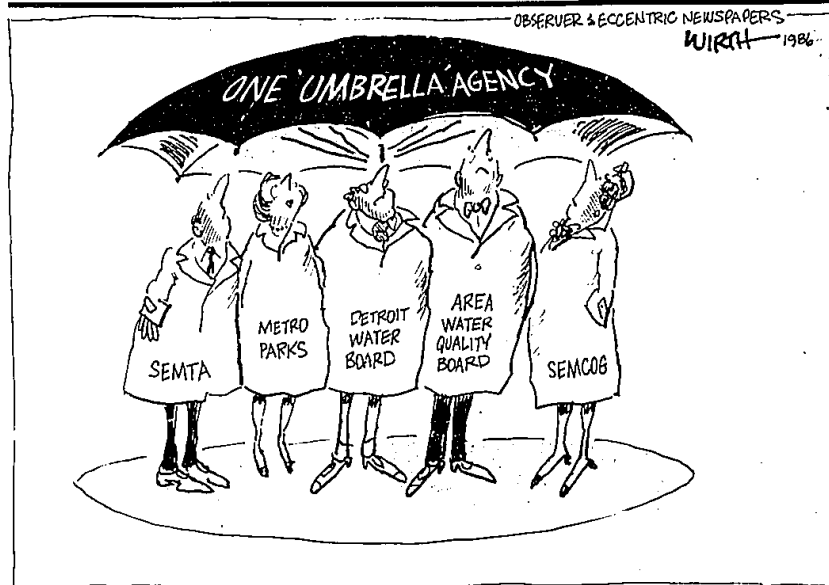
There's also the question of Oakland County's near over-saturation of lodging spots. In Farmington Hills alone, there are 450 motel rooms and another 750 under construction. Cobo Hall's expansion, however, is expected to create a need for up to 20,000 more hotel rooms in the tri-county region, according to Farmington's futures program report.

Indeed, an inn in Downtown Farmington probably would succeed if it's something special and if it has a clear definition of its market segment — for example, the business traveler or the bus traveler.

Take it from a man who should know. Says William McLaughlin, Metropolitan Detroit Convention & Visitors Bureau president: "That kind of inn not only would be delightful, but also a tremendous boon to Downtown Farmington."

A downtown inn appears to be a fine idea. But without the right chemistry — location, architecture, clientele, Botsford-like charm — the potential boon could turn into a woeful bust.

— Bob Sklar



New life for regionalism

EVERYONE WHO has ever devoted much attention to the problem has come to the identical conclusion.

Joining the lengthy parade is the Hudson Institute, an Indianapolis-based think tank, which recently wrote a report for the state Senate entitled "Michigan Beyond 2000."

In its concluding chapters on major cities in the next century, the Hudson Institute authors say:

"Finally, Detroit and its neighbors should consider further regionalization of governmental functions in instances where this promises economies of scale such as those realized by the Detroit area's water system."

YOU'VE HEARD that refrain before. In the 1970s, a couple of state task forces recommended as much. Metropolitan Fund and its offspring, Regional Citizens, mulled over the situation in the mid-1970s and came to the same conclusion.

The idea deserves another hearing. The Michigan Legislature has been wrestling with a pair of bills on the governance of regional agencies — the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMATA) and the Detroit Water Board.

Essentially, our lawmakers are taking a piecemeal approach. The SEMTA bill, authored by Sen. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, would place the transit agency



Tim Richard

under some variation of the "Big Four" — the mayor of Detroit, the Wayne and Oakland county executives and the Macomb board chairman. The water board reform would give suburban customers of the Detroit Water and Sewerage System some board voices in setting rates.

THE REGIONALIST idea is to place all the single-purpose operating agencies under one "umbrella" agency, perhaps a jazzed-up Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

SEMCOG (or its successor) would appoint the governing boards of all operating agencies. Goodness knows, there are enough of them:

1) SEMTA — the seven-county transit board with four members picked by the mayor of Detroit, four by the Wayne County executive, three by various means from Oakland County, two by the Macomb County board, and two by other means.

2) The Detroit Water Board — six Detroit residents and six tame suburbanites,

all picked by the mayor of Detroit and all subject to instant discharge the moment they displease the mayor.

3) Area Water Quality Board — a sprawling child of SEMCOG whose membership is picked by a kaleidoscope of agencies and interests.

4) Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority — a five-county agency, which runs the 14 metroparks, but not necessarily in coordination with other regional agencies. County boards and the governor pick the eight HCMA directors.

5) CHPCSEM — the Comprehensive Health Planning Council of Southeastern Michigan. I have little knowledge of this agency other than that it appears to say, don't build hospitals in the suburbs, build them in Detroit.

ACCORDING to regionalist thinking, the umbrella agency would appoint the members of all these regional boards. The umbrella agency would set the personnel policies and review the budgets and long-range plans of the individual agencies.

At last count, there were something like 400 units of government in the seven-county region. But there are certain big, regional jobs that can be done only by big, regional agencies.

Regional governments exist. It's time we brought them under one umbrella.



staff photo by BOB SKLAR

Planning consultant Christopher Waczyn addresses the Farmington City Council Monday evening. He's a proponent of a European-style urban inn in Downtown Farmington.

Southfield High School class prepared to show Dearborn

THE SENIOR CLASS board over at Southfield High School needs your help.

Following the lead of the National Education Association (NEA), the seniors are seriously considering pulling their prom out of Dearborn. Recently, the NEA announced it was moving its national convention out of the Hyatt Regency to protest that city's residents-only park ordinance.

But unlike the NEA, which has the time and the clout to find another site, the Southfield seniors could find themselves high and dry on prom night — and that would be a shame.

You see, the class board has a real challenge before classmates vote next week. The board must convince some 400 other seniors that the boycott would be a smart move.

SMART AND just it may be, but nobody wants to end up in the parking lot on prom night with nowhere to go. That just shouldn't happen.

Instead of being penalized, these kids should be rewarded for taking this courageous stand. Discrimination in any form is wrong and these students are wise enough to recognize the ordinance for what it is.

You can argue what you want, but the political reality is that the only way to



crackerbarrel debate

Steve Barnaby

break the back of this immaturely motivated ordinance is through the pocketbook.

But what the senior board needs is a place for its prom. And we know that out there somewhere is somebody who can provide them with a place. You may be that person.

IN A lot of ways, there is something symbolic about a bunch of students from Southfield taking up the cudgel against this ordinance.

Southfield, a relatively new city as municipalities go, grew up during the time Dearborn was prospering from the coffers of Ford Motor Co. and bragging that blacks were unwelcome.

To racial bigots, Mayor Orville Hubbard was a hero. His solution to racial

harmony was simply to keep blacks out. He also took a lot of credit for providing exceptional municipal services to voters. Included in those services were the parks.

When leaving the city to seek their dream, blacks migrated to the northern suburbs — many to Southfield. Frankly, a lot of folks held their breath. Many feared that Southfield would end up a victim of white flight. After all, few, if any, cities in America have successfully integrated.

AND IT would be naive to say it has been easy.

But Southfield residents, for the most part, have worked hard to make their racially mixed community work. While other communities have tried to avoid the issue, Southfield has dealt with the issue head on.

The schools are an example of that community's struggle. Children of several races, ethnic groups and creeds are combining to make a statement.

Of course the struggle never is easy. But Southfield has dealt with it much more honestly than any other community of which I can think.

So let's throw our support behind these students who are showing us the way. Let's find them a place to have a prom.