

Opinion

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Lawn signs

They promote elections

A monthly peek into Bob Sklar's notebook —

THEY'RE recognizable reminders of a coming election. And they represent grass-roots politicking in its purest form. Besides publicizing names of candidates seeking public office, political lawn signs help identify who's actively involved in this representative democracy of ours.

At the very least, political lawn signs — companions to curbside placards and bumper stickers — help promote election day.

Let the courts determine whether they're constitutionally protected as a form of free speech. From this vantage point, if they help attract a few more voters, well, that's dandy. Candidate forums and campaign literature alone haven't exactly been overwhelming inspirations in Farmington Hills.

In November, just 14 percent of the electorate turned out to elect four city council members. In June, an embarrassing 5 percent of those registered voted on a special parks tax referendum. On Aug. 5, only 18 percent of the registered voters cared enough to cast ballots in the primary.

Granted, political lawn signs can clutter roadsides and prove hazardous when excessively used or inappropriately placed. But that's no reason to all but ban them.

AN ORDINANCE with enough teeth surely could be enacted to prevent the city from becoming sign-choked during political campaigns, long the concern of planning commissioners.

With the Nov. 4 general election only 11 weeks away, we urge the city council to take decisive action when considering a change in the sign ordinance Aug. 25.

Traditionally, planning commissioners have stood by the existing sign ordinance, which empowers the zoning board of appeals to permit political signs in light industrial districts, hardly hotbeds of public travel. The ordinance also allows homeowners to put signs in their front windows, but such placement clearly isn't apt to catch the eye like a front yard.

The ordinance proposed by planners at the urging of council members seven years ago provides a solid foundation



Bob Sklar

for resurrecting discussion about political lawn signs in neighborhoods.

Under the proposal, signs advertising a candidate for public office or a position on a public issue could be posted three weeks before election day. Signs couldn't exceed nine square feet in size and only one sign would be permitted per improved lot or parcel.

Most candidates pay good money for materials and recruit volunteers to make signs. Generally, the signs are well done and colorful, even creative. They're no more an eyesore than real estate signs, which potentially can stay up a lot longer than three weeks at a pop.

RAGTAG POLITICAL signs are the exception, and for good reason. Posting a gaudy sign or not repairing a damaged one says a lot about a candidacy — all bad.

The proposed 48-hour deadline for taking down political lawn signs would suit us fine. A sign pushing a past election is as much of a blight to a neighborhood as a trash-strewn lawn. The proposed penalty, \$100 a day, is stiff enough to assure wide compliance.

You only have to picture a vacant but conspicuous field blanketed with signs of all shapes — commonplace in some communities — to appreciate the need to be tough.

We'd have no problem with zoning inspectors handing out violation notices when signs are unlawfully posted either in a right of way or on unimproved property.

Make no mistake: political lawn signs have no business in rights of way where they can obstruct a motorist's vision, or on utility poles, where they can leave nails and splinters.

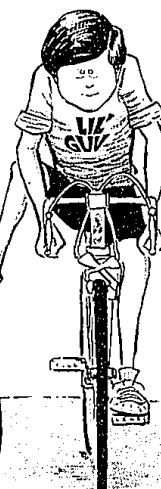
Once the Farmington Hills City Council sees the merit in bringing political lawn signs into the open, it would behoove candidates to direct their workers to heed stipulations for use.

Zoning inspectors have better things to do than hand-deliver violation notices to candidates, who, of all people, should recognize the importance of heeding requirements for signs, which quickly can become visual pollutants.

OK THIS TIME'S FOR THE WHOLE ENCHILADA.



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Campaign costs sky high

THE BUSINESS of financing political campaigns is out of hand. This may well be because the whole business of campaigning is out of hand.

Many candidates now spend more than a year campaigning for a four-year term. Wayne County executive William Lucas, who lost interest in Wayne County government a couple of years ago, has been on the stump for — what's it been? A couple of years, surprisingly enough.

Congress is out for the summer and hasn't been in much of the year because of November elections at which every U.S. representative and a third of the Senate is up for re-election.

While the officeholders campaign a lot of the business of government gets put on the back burner. And the cost in dollars is astronomical.

ON ELECTION NIGHT, vote counters were remarking that unsuccessful candidate for governor Dan Murphy spent some more than \$625,000 to receive 61,439 votes.

Why not just pass out \$5 bills at the polls, one was suggested, it would be easier and cheaper. Wouldn't work though. Pretty soon every candidate would be passing out \$5 bills and then there would be a contest to come up with the cleanest \$5 bill, or a \$5 bill in a translucent paper-weight or letter opener.

Then someone would come up with a



Bob Wisler

signaturized \$5 gift certificate. Then a candidate would decide a \$10 bill would work better. Well, you can see there would be no end in sight.

There is almost no end in sight now, however. Dick Chrysler spent \$3 million or \$15 a vote, in his losing effort. If it weren't for the fact that the newspapers raked up a history of questionable business practices in Chrysler's background, he would have won the election and this would have escalated the cost of the general election campaign for governor.

BILL LUCAS' election campaign cost far less, but he was dogged by a squabble with the Secretary of State's election division that held up the funding for his campaign.

There is a state limit on how much candidates can spend on gubernatorial campaigns, if they accept public financing. The present limit is \$1.2 million. State elections director Chris Thomas has suggested this is unreasonably low and the limit ought to go up to \$1.3 million for the primary and \$2 mil-

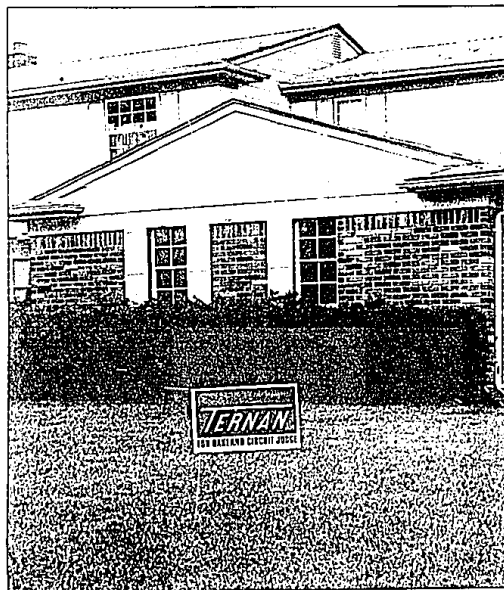
lion for the general election.

One of the problems with campaigns is that most of the money spent is spent on approaches designed to capture a voter's fleeting interest. This means slick brochures, 30-second television and radio ads and mass mailings that do little more than repeat a few basic ideas and slogans and which by their very nature cannot impart to the public any sense of where the candidates stand on the multiple issues that face modern officeholders.

IT DOESN'T seem unreasonable to try to limit these spendings, so that voters will, perhaps of necessity, take some time to find out about the various candidates for office by reading about them, or possibly by watching them on television, being interviewed or in debate.

In fact, much of the problem in overspending for elections could be lessened if television stations would take more of an interest in scheduling long interviews and debates. Despite the opportunity for television to perform valuable service in elections, there is little interest or pressure for the stations to take much of a part in the process.

The whole system of financing elections is a hodge-podge that ought to be scrutinized by the government to come up with better ways of electing officials and of finding a way where money is not the most important ingredient.



BOD SKLAR/Staff photographer

Political lawn signs, long the target of controversy in Farmington Hills, are allowed in neighboring Southfield and Farmington.

A mystery remains locked

NOW I UNDERSTAND why ignorance can be bliss.

This enlightenment comes from a long-held frustration.

I suspect that you can at least share in my frustration. Well, at least it's a frustration that all of us who live with modern architecture share.

Why do they install double doors if one is always going to be locked?

Dealing with the locked door wouldn't be so bad if we knew why. It's not the double door that's so bad. It's the mystery that can drive a sane person nuts.

For years we all have become collective fools by continually pulling on the one door that always seems to be locked.

You've seen disgruntled patrons at hospitals, supermarkets and, of course, at the office where you work or where your doctor or lawyer light their neon signs. If your home has a double door, you very well may have risked a perfectly good relationship by inviting over a friend and yelling, "just walk right in."

MOST OF these doors have a sign on one side that says, "Please use other



crackerbarrel debate

Steve Barnaby

door," or "Use left door," or "Use right door."

One recent summer day I hunted far and wide for an answer, asking anyone who might have the faintest idea. Summer days are like that, you know.

"It's a management prerogative," replied one person after giving me a very curious look. "If they want one door locked, that's the way it stays."

But at least two others gave credit to the maintenance crew.

"Because the janitor wants it that way." I figured that O&E columnist Fred Delano had revealed the secret when he quipped, "because the English are quietly taking over the world again." That was good for about a half-hour until I entered a building where all the doors

on the left, instead of the right, were locked.

"It's to disarm the customers," said another person. "If they are mad by the time they've pulled on the wrong door a couple of times, they just feel sheepish. It's all psychological."

I tried the guy who is in charge of doors in our building.

He just grinned — for the longest time. "Gosh, I don't know, it's just always been that way," he finally said.

Another said, "because the guy in charge of silly things thinks it's silly."

BEING THERE age of hi-tech, I went to the computer experts and asked. One of them launched into drawing a rather complex diagram to explain. He seemed like he knew. But I sure didn't understand. But that's the way it is with computer experts.

I finally did find one of the maintenance guys to ask.

"Actually they're not supposed to be locked. It's against safety regulations."

He was explaining how double doors worked to another hapless employee as I wandered back to my office wondering why I had even asked. But from now on I guess I'll just go on grasping for the door that will, of course, always be locked.