

Opinion

Robert Sklar editor/477-5450

33203 Grand River Ave./Farmington, MI 48024

Philip Power chairman of the board
Richard Aginlan president
Dick Isaham general manager
Steve Barnaby managing editor
Fred Wright circulation director

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Avoiding debate ruins credibility

SOMETIMES YOU can't fight city hall. Or at least it appears that way.

And when nurturing public trust and confidence in government, appearance is often as important as fact. Never was Farmington Hills' credibility dealt a swifter blow than during the Aug. 21 unveiling of a modified plan for the city's first athletic park.

The plan is based on suggestions from residents living near the site of the proposed park, 13 Mile and Farmington.

Residents armed with questions and concerns met with Special Services Director Dan Potter to review the plan. But to residents' surprise, planning commissioners also were meeting the same night with an agenda that included approval of the park's site plan.

Most of the approximately 30 residents were surprised that they were not notified of the scheduled site plan approval. One infuriated man stormed out the door after realizing he wasn't discussing the park plan with the city's decision makers.

City officials should be commended for soliciting public participation and following through with a modified plan based on residents' concerns.

Unfortunately, all good intentions were quickly dashed that night. If residents wanted a definitive voice in the park's future, they were at the wrong meeting.

Potter denied any attempt to deceive residents and prevent them from voicing their opinions before planning commissioners. Potter said he assumed the plan would meet with public approval because it was modified according to residents' comments.

Potter also called the scheduling conflict a breakdown in communications. The site plan review was not scheduled until three days before the planning commission's meeting on Aug. 21. The

Parks and Recreation Commission scheduled the residents' meeting two weeks earlier.

It is the appearance that city officials were avoiding public debate that is most damaging to the city's credibility.

It's not surprising then that one resident asked Potter whether the neighbors truly had a say in the park's planning.

What took residents by surprise was that they were not notified of the site plan review.

Yes, the addendum to the agenda was posted on city hall's main doors. But not one resident was aware of it. And it wasn't like Potter announced planning commissioners' review of the plan. Notice of the meeting came out during Potter's response to a resident's question.

Sure, an argument can be made for the city's desire to expedite park plans in order to secure bids, award a contract and get construction going before winter. There's no argument with that.

But in their hurry, city officials pulled the plug on their credibility, especially after making a well-publicized invitation for public participation.

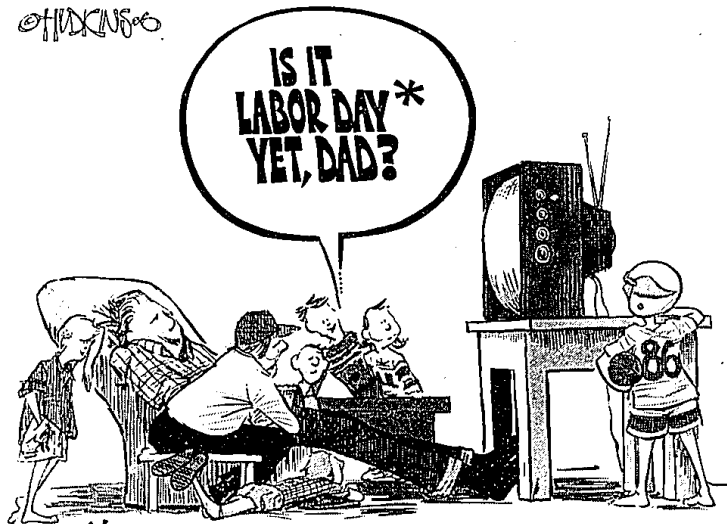
City officials would do well to remember who they work for. After all, that's why they're called public servants.

Certainly, public interests were not paramount in the decision to schedule site plan review while those residents who would be most affected by an athletic park on their doorstep were still actively discussing further modifications to the plan.

We can only wonder if a different decision or other changes to the plan would have been made if planning commissioners had heard residents' comments firsthand.

— Joanne Maliszewski

OFFKINS



* THE BEGINNING OF THE FOOTBALL SEASON.

Our river's future You must decide how clean is clean

The Crackerbarrel needs to hear how you feel about the Rouge River.

You see, when it comes to a less-than-majestic stream, we're talking pollution — under the best of circumstances.

A whole lot of folks believe this — that the Rouge always will be polluted, that it's a matter of how little pollution, not how clean. But that's a hard sell, against the American spirit.

Even an editor who has prided himself with having a hyperactive social conscience has to admit the prospect for "cleaning up the Rouge," like most folks, means "clean" looks pretty bleak. Not impossible, just incredibly expensive — more expensive than most folks would be willing to pay.

You may remember that back in May, the Observer & Eccentric published a special section entitled "Our River." In it we chronicled the river's history, how it became polluted, attempts to clean it up and an eight-point program to deal with the situation.

The response was overwhelming. JUST TO MAKE SURE they didn't miss it, several dozen public officials were mailed a copy. We enclosed a letter asking for their reaction and let them know we would be keeping the electorate informed on how their efforts rated.

Several public officials mailed in de-



crackerbarrel debate

Steve Barnaby

tailed responses outlining how their cities, townships and other governmental agencies have participated in efforts to clean up the river.

It truly was an impressive list, with some truly fine efforts deserving kudos. Especially important to know is that your local city and township officials were the most responsive and detailed in their replies. They obviously are concerned and very frustrated.

The silence from Lansing types was nearly deafening — the governor and his newest rival included.

These missing responses aside, the Rouge River over the years has certainly received more than enough attention. Literally dozens of studies, costing millions of dollars, have been done.

A "super sewer" project, which was supposed to solve a major portion of the problem, has been bogged down in bureaucracy and lawsuits.

Local governments, county and state

agencies, business and industry as well as environmental groups all have dedicated time or money to the Rouge. Even a local television station has taken up the cudgel.

BUT THE river is still less than what we would prefer. And maybe what we prefer is too much to expect. That's what Plymouth Township Supervisor Maurie Breen warns against.

The idea that the Rouge can ever be clean enough for recreational use — swimming, boating and fishing — is probably impossible, he says.

Now don't be hard on the good supervisor. Plymouth Township is one governmental unit that is recognized for having done a pretty good job in dealing with the river.

But Breen estimates that it would cost each person in the Rouge area \$1,000 just the first year to get it up to a recreationally clean standard. The cost would go up from there.

Maybe you agree, maybe disagree. But we would like to hear from you on this one. Write the Crackerbarrel a letter and let us know what you expect the river to be and how much you would be willing to pay.

In the meantime we'll be writing more stories keeping you up-to-date on the Rouge and what is being done to make it cleaner — or should I say less dirty.

Campaign debate: 1 topic for 1 hour

THEY DIDN'T ask me because I'm not running for governor. But I would have been ready.

Someone asked a candidate at the League of Women Voters' debate for Republican candidates how he would change the state campaign finance laws. I would have said the law is OK as is — what we need to change are the debate rules.

In most so-called debates — whether sponsored by the League, a chamber of commerce or even a newspaper — the candidates have two minutes to answer a question. The rule seldom varies. Then it's on to a different topic.

That puts a premium on moron-level TV answers — one or two glib sentences. The candidate never has to demonstrate his/her mastery of a subject.

We voters are the losers. To hold office for two or four years, you have to deal with serious social and economic problems. Two-minute answers don't work.

LINCOLN AND Douglas didn't give two-minute answers. What brings them to mind is that Aug. 27 was the 128th anniversary of the second of their six debates for the U.S. Senate seat from Illinois.

They would go on for two hours at a crack on a single issue. Lincoln biographer James G. Randall notes they could have talked about slavery, westward expansion of the railroads, homestead policy, preservation of land, economic depressions, the condition of factory workers and so on.

"The debaters were not concerned with a representative coverage of national questions, but almost entirely with slavery . . .," said Randall.

The format of those classic debates was something like 30 minutes for A, 45 minutes for B and 15 minutes for A. Can you imagine a Dick Chrysler up against Lincoln, repeating "we need tax payers, not tax users" for 45 solid minutes?



Tim Richard

I'D LIKE TO see Gov. Jim Blanchard and challenger Bill Lucas go at a single topic for one hour — say, property taxes. Two good candidates could do it.

Would they exempt senior citizens from school property taxes? Would they favor replacing half our property taxes with a higher sales or income tax?

What about assessing property at 40 percent of true market value instead of 50 percent? What about farm assessments?

Say, how about these 50 percent, 12-year abatements local governments are giving right and left? Should their use be limited to older cities and not townships? Should they be given only for factories and not for hotels and hamburger stands?

Just property taxes. A whole hour.

THEN WE could have another entire debate on a single topic — say, Detroit problems.

Is there such a thing as "suburban sprawl"? Is it bad? Would new highway construction like M-75 contribute to sprawl?

Should Detroit be allowed to set water and sewer rates without oversight by the Public Service Commission or suburban representatives? Should the state continue to underwrite 99 percent of the costs of the Institute of Arts while Detroit has 100 percent of the control?

Boy, can you see Jim Blanchard squirm as fellow Democrats Coleman Young and Rep. John Bennett watch him handle those toughies?

Then one hour on crime, death penalty and police chases. One hour on teacher certification.

Knowledge. Depth.

To hold office for two or four years, you have to deal with serious social and economic problems. Two-minute answers don't work.

How to secure your castle

THERE WAS A feeling at one time that you could stay out of harm's way by avoiding shady bars, staying away from ominous streets and using a little common sense.

Try telling that to the people victimized by these crimes in the last month:

- A Farmington Hills couple was bound and shoved into a closet while burglars ransacked their home.

- Two Plymouth Township women, one in her 80s, were surprised in their home by handgun-wielding thugs who robbed them of jewelry, cash and a sense of security.

- In an early morning attack, two men surprised two women in a West Bloomfield home and carried out a robbery while two sons of one of the victims slept upstairs.

- Cat burglars strike almost at will in the Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills area, boldly breaking into homes while occupants are sleeping.

- In several suburbs, thieves stalk expensive cars to their homes, where they rob the drivers in their garages.

- Homes are ransacked in Livonia, a woman is robbed and sexually assaulted in her Southfield home and the beat goes on and on.



Rich Perlberg

ferred to by Donat Alarms of Michigan, suggests that home security sales reached \$200 billion in 1985 and will increase fourfold by 1990.

Even so, the number of alarm companies in the greater Detroit area decreased by a third, from 180 to 120, since 1978, according to Mark Springer, director of marketing for Habitec, the home security system that Donat markets through Hudson's.

Not surprisingly, Springer sings the praises of home security systems. He recommends wiring all doors (entry points for 85 percent of all home burglaries), all basement windows (the window of choice for most burglars) and a few vulnerable main-floor windows. Install an interior device such as movement-detecting beams and pressure-sensitive carpet pads, and you are protected against the vast majority of break-ins, he says.

The professional crook probably can't be stopped if he has targeted your home, says Springer. But most thieves aren't that polished. They are looking for an easy way to get cash, perhaps to buy drugs. If your home looks difficult, they are happy to visit your neighbor.

That same line of reasoning makes some people feel that home security systems are superfluous. My friendly locksmith says that a deadbolt for each door, secured windows and a well-lit exterior will discourage most thieves.

"The light stops the thief from approaching the house, the locks stop the thief from getting in," says the locksmith. "The alarms only work if the thief gains entry. It's a third line of defense."

Maybe so, says Springer. But he claims homes protected by his system are untouched, while neighboring homes are burglarized. He also says that many new homes are being built with home security systems.

Security, after all, has become very dear to two-income households since 62 percent of all break-ins occur during the day.

"You and I go to work every day to legitimate jobs," says Springer. "So, too, do the intruders go to work every day."