

OBSERVATION POINT

Regional Government For Our Suburbs?



By Philip H. Power, Publisher

For us living in the suburbs, last week's policy forum on local government in the Detroit metropolitan area was an enormously important session.

Jointly sponsored by the Committee for Economic Development (CED), a non-profit research outfit, and this area's own Metropolitan Fund, the forum considered a new, two-level governmental scheme for metropolitan areas which was prepared by CED.

Essentially, the CED report proposed that there be a region-wide government level handling regional problems such as transport and air and water pollution, while smaller, more local government units have authority over other kinds of more local problems such as frequency of rubbish pickup and deployment of policemen.

That sounds kind of abstract to most people, and it did to me until fiery debate erupted at the forum, sparked by Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) Chairman Mel Ravitz, who attacked the idea of regional government as "a myth pushed by academics, which could only be imposed on people from above."

FOR WHAT REALLY was being discussed was the long-run power of local suburban communities to their own thing, in a metropolitan area in which problems are becoming increasingly region-wide and countless local government units present a crazy-quilt of built-in resistance to change.

There is no real disagreement over the point that regional problems ought to be solved regionally. It makes no sense for Southfield, for example, to have its own city bus system running only within the city limits if most people using the buses are going back and forth to and from Detroit.

The real argument comes over just how regional solutions to regional problems are implemented - voluntarily or by some other means.

Those advocating regional government with some real clout (i.e. those who oppose voluntarism) argue that it makes no sense to have a voluntary regional air and water pollution authority if Livonia, for example, can withdraw and let a factory within the city pollute the air of the entire region.

Such people argue that efficiency requires a regional pollution authority with the real power to require the factory in Livonia to keep its smoke emission down, regardless of how the city might feel about its industrial tax base.

They are probably right. We all know what happened when the American colonies tried a pure federal system with no coercive powers held by the central government - chaos, confusion, and inaction.

If we're going to solve some

of our pressing regional problems, we're going to have to give regional bodies dealing with them the clout actually to get something done.

BUT THE argument isn't that simple.

For the core of the matter is not what kind of power should a regional authority have, but rather just how will we get there.

In Canada, for example, the Ontario provincial government passed a bill setting up metropolitan regional government for Toronto and its suburbs. The government was, in effect, imposed by the provincial legislature.

In Michigan, no such steps have been taken by the state legislature; most people think they won't for some time.

So how do we get effective regional government?

ONE APPROACH, taken in this area by SEMCOG, is to be entirely voluntary. Local governments can join (as those in this area have), quit (as Tryg did recently), or debate the merits of staying in (as happened some months ago in Livonia).

This means that any progress made by SEMCOG will be slow, because it involves working out compromises acceptable to all the local government members.

But, argue people like Chairman Ravitz, that progress is certain because it is voluntary.

Ravitz claims that the Michigan legislature won't impose regional government on this area

and that the local governments won't accept an imposition by any other authority. He asserts such slow voluntarism is the only practical way to achieve even a small measure of the kind of regional government that is needed.

RAVITZ MAY have an excellent argument as long as local city councils and mayors don't want to give up any of their power to a regional authority. But his position has two serious flaws:

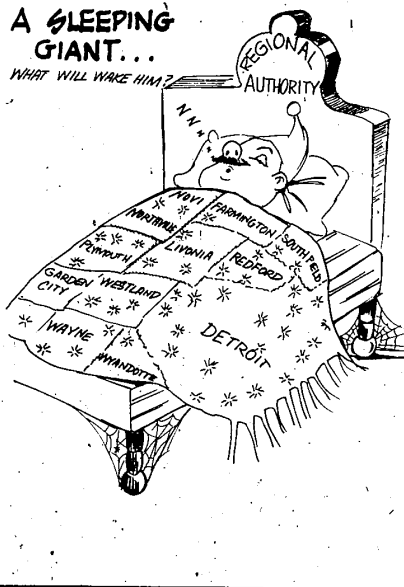
1) Because any program SEMCOG adopts has to be approved voluntarily by its constituent local government units, there is a tendency to design programs around what can be sold rather than according to what will do the needed job.

2) Because a voluntary approach involves lots of talking and lots of compromising, there is a danger that by the time SEMCOG gets around to actually implementing a program it will be too late. It may take years to work out adequate regional air pollution control programs, by which time we all may be suffocated.

SO THE argument goes on.

I don't know when it will be resolved, but I do know that its resolution directly affects the kinds of suburban communities we all live in.

The politicians, now licking their wounds after election day, better take notice.



DISSENT

View points expressed in DISSENT do not necessarily reflect those of Observer Newspapers Inc., but are presented in the belief that publication of all segments of thought on a public issue is a prerequisite to understanding and progress.

By GERALD MONTGOMERY

In my capacity as Executive Director of the Greater Detroit Safety Council many disturbing statistics come across my desk. One of them verified over and over is that alcohol is responsible for 50% or more of all traffic fatalities. All of which brings me, to the subject of this letter.

I am in violent disagreement with the article by Dan Gilmartin (Southfield News and Observer, September 30, 1970) advocating lowering of the drinking age.

Drivers under the age of 20 constitute 10.2% of the driving population. (11,000,000) They are responsible for 16.6% of all accidents and 14.7% of all traffic fatalities. Drivers age 20 to 24 (legal drinking age 21) make up 11% of all drivers (11,800,000), but they are responsible for 17.6% of all traffic accidents and 19.3% of all fatalities.

The next largest group in total number of drivers is the 45-49 age driver, constituting 10.5% of all drivers (11,300,000) are responsible for only 7.5% of the accidents and 7.7% of the fatalities.

Drivers under the age of 20 have an extremely bad driving record in comparison to the average, but it is not nearly as bad as those just a few years older. Those who have begun to drink!

We all realize, I'm sure, that many of these young drivers do drink, but I am sure the percentage would increase dramatically if it were legal to do so, and so would the accidents!

Beer or speed? Are these the only alternatives? I seriously doubt if a change in the drinking age would have any effect on the drug situation. Young people who want drugs will find them and young people who want to drink will drink, but making it legal would only compound the situation.

Sense And Nonsense

It doesn't make much sense to us that members of area-school boards haven't done more to make things more comfortable for fans attending the high school football games.

By comfort, we are referring to the lack of comfort stations - or just call it as it is, lavatories - at the athletic fields.

Have you attended a game at Livonia's Bentley High recently, received a sudden message that needs immediate attention and then discovered you have to walk the full length of the field for an exit and then another 300 yards to the school building before getting relief?

The same situation exists at Franklin and Stevenson as well as at Farmington and Thurston High, to mention a few.

If the school officials feel it necessary to charge admission, then the same administrators should take whatever steps are necessary to provide comfort stations.

We know just how some of the spectators feel about this situation... we got caught good at a recent game.

Tim Richard writes

How Does Name Get On Mail Lists?

Not being the demonstrating type or a political hell-raiser, I generally pitch junk mail into the circular file, but a couple of weeks ago I decided to get to the bottom of things - to find out how MY name got on those mailing lists.

It stands to reason that not all four million or so householders in the State of Michigan are being hit by a certain piece of junk mail. Why me?

SO WITH NAIVE logic I began writing to the folks who were writing to me. First on the list was Fingerhut Manufacturing Co. of St. Cloud, Minn. which was offering a 30-day, no-risk free trial of his and hers car coats. "Will you please explain," wrote I, "how my name got on your mailing list?"

The unsigned, handwritten note on the form labeled "speed message" came a few days later: "We rent lists of customer names from other reputable companies with which you have probably

done business with (sic) before. If you wish to order car coats, return your order form for processing.

I didn't.

Another came from Golden Valley Land Corp. touting land in Toltec, Ariz. I wrote to both their Phoenix and Southfield offices and a couple of weeks later got this reply from a P.R. guy in Phoenix.

"I AM SURE you are aware of the need for a company to advertise and try to interest prospective customers. As our company does not operate a retail store, it is exceedingly difficult for us to use the standard approach.

"We certainly do not mean to infringe upon anyone's freedom

or liberties by sending unsolicited mail. I feel that if a person is not interested, there obviously is no response. In my mind, it is very similar to seeing a garish ad in a newspaper or a magazine that I have purchased," he began.

Good grief! I wasn't trying to sell him a newspaper ad; just asking a simple question. But he had more:

"The so-called direct mail industry has been criticized by many for utilizing a government service and not paying fully for this service. Most of the people involved in the direct mail industry are more than happy to support increases in the postage rate. There is no question that the Post Office should pay its own way and therefore the people who

use the service must share the cost and not the taxpayer."

OK, OK, BUDDY, but how did my name get on your mailing list? Just cut the politics and tell me.

"We normally compile our mailing lists from City Directories, Phone Directories, and/or Donnelly Directories. If I can ever be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to call on me."

One could believe the Golden Valley P.R. guy's explanation only if one could believe that every single person listed in those directories got a brochure touting Toltec.

Sorry, Mr. P.R. guy, you can't be of any further help.

Bob McClellan

Senator Speaks Wise Words

A great deal of nonsense emanates from the hustings during political campaigns. As a newspaperman, I suppose I hear as much of the flowery, flamboyant, empty-headed rhetoric as anyone else. That's why I'm glad I took the time to listen to U.S. Sen. Philip Hart when he stopped off in Westland last week.

In no more than a 15-minute chat, Hart made a couple of points that made excellent sense and impressed me profoundly, proving, perhaps, that quality is preferable even in politics.

ONE OF THE THINGS that Hart touched upon was "our unborn constituency." The state's senior senator feels it behooves the public official to measure his activity so that he not only takes into account its effect on his people tomorrow or the next day, but that it also makes provisions for those who will share our earth many years from now.

Most Michiganders are aware of the fight that Hart waged for the last decade against severe opposition to convert the Sleeping Bear Dunes into a national park.

"You know," he said his modest gathering, "probably not many of us will visit the Sleeping Bear Dunes, but think of all those who will enjoy this beautiful natural resource 50 years from now."

Hart paraphrased a Biblical quotation to make his second point. "By their budgets ye shall know them," he observed.

HE DECLARED IT WAS an easy task for a politician to promise something to everyone, and to be all things to all people, but that such activity meant little or nothing when it comes to getting the job done.

"If you want to see if a public official really means what he says," Hart asserted, "watch how he spends his money. If he

tells you he's against pollution, but refuses to vote money for it, then it's clear that he really doesn't mean what he says."

Hart implied, quite subtly perhaps, that the voter use his arguments as a yardstick in measuring the performance of public officials.

We must agree. They could indeed be very efficient and practical tools in this respect.

In fact, if you dwell upon the senator's reasoning for awhile, you can see how they might be applied to the performance of any man.

Think what a wonderful place this would be if all of us, in every aspect of our daily lives, tried to make this world a Utopia for our sons and daughters yet unborn.

And think, too, how much better life would be if instead of unleashing a tirade of meaningless words, we made every effort, so to speak, to put our money where our mouth is.

Editorial & Opinion OBSERVER NEWSPAPERS, INC. Philip H. Power, Publisher The Livonia Observer - The Redford Observer The Westland Observer - The Garden City Observer The Plymouth Mail & Observer - The Southfield News & Observer The Farmington Enterprise & Observer Published by Observer Newspapers, Inc. 271 S. Main Street, P.O. Box 200, Plymouth, Mich. 48170