

Opinion

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Routine it's not Redistricting — a sensitive job

TRUSTEE SUSAN Remels put it well more than a year ago in discussing how you elevate the community's role in Farmington Public Schools affairs: "I think it's very important for the public to know who we are and what we're doing."

Appreciate the value of community participation. That'll help spread the word about school activities and educational trends, she added.

In that spirit, we're pleased to hear the school board has authorized a seven-member citizens committee to chart a course for the district in light of increasing elementary and decreasing high school enrollment. The board is committed to including representation from each geographic section of the district.

Trustee James Abernethy asked with justification why recommendations for attendance boundary changes couldn't come quickly since all needed enrollment data seemed to be at the administration's finger tips.

But we agree with Superintendent Graham Lewis' belief that intimately involving residents in the sensitive area of redistricting is in the district's best interest. "What we have to guarantee," he said, "is trust."

Trust, of course, is something you earn, not expect.

LEWIS' STAFF, professionals that they are, probably could draw new boundary lines with precision. But who's to say the citizens committee won't dig up new data or present new ideas, particularly since a new elementary in western Farmington Hills seems a certainty.

Once the committee forwards its recommendations this winter, we'd concur with Remels that a town meeting format would be appropriate to solicit community response.

Redistricting seems simple enough: Move some students from overcrowded schools to less-crowded ones to balance enrollment.

But it's a practice that can strain friendships, break up neighborhoods, cause long bus rides and

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disrupt learning patterns during a youngster's most impressionable years.

To their credit, Farmington school officials have not made it an annual autumn rite.

RAPID GROWTH in the western part of the 10,777-student district has pushed at least five of the 11 Farmington elementarys to capacity. Elementary enrollment is up by 320 students this year and is projected to rise through 1991. At the senior high level, enrollments at North and Farmington are rising while Harrison's is falling.

Because constant transfers can have a psychological effect on young children, school officials wisely have pledged not to transfer elementary students who already have been moved twice.

Warranted or not, attacks on motives no doubt will accompany citizen committee findings.

The committee's success lies not only in how receptive the school board is to committee findings, but also how precisely the school board defines the committee's charge. That definition is both pivotal and pressing as the committee takes shape.

Any shift in attendance boundaries should go hand in hand with equalizing learning opportunities. Cost can't be ignored but balanced enrollments should help open the door to offering the same classes and facilities at each school.

Beyond town meetings, the school board should consider a redistricting hotline to quell rumors, summarize options and encourage comments.

Whatever direction redistricting takes, it should never be forgotten that just as the school board shouldn't shirk its responsibility to consider feedback, residents shouldn't shirk their responsibility to provide it.

Tax overhaul Schools must get top priority

SOMETHING HAS to change. Argue as politicians will over the details, it's crystal clear that Michigan's property tax picture is deteriorating. Folks have a gut feeling that property taxes are "too high." You see it in polls. You hear it in neighborhood conversation.

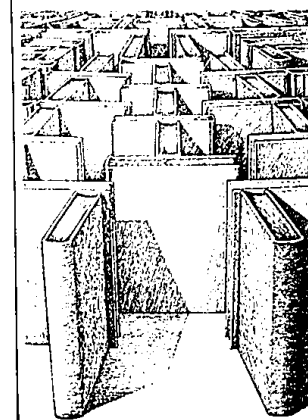
The so-called "Harden Commission," an advisory group to the state Board of Education, recently called for a major overhaul of school finance in Michigan. There will be lots of arguments over details. But before anyone issues blanket judgments, let's look at what direction Michigan should be going.

PROPERTY TAXES in Michigan are 133 percent higher than the national average. But averages are only statistics. Here are some hard realities.

• Big companies are getting concessions from cities and townships in the form of 12-year, 50 percent property tax abatements. If City A doesn't grant it, Township B will.

So these firms get abatements, whether they need 'em or not. But worse, the longtime resident — doing business at the same stand, supporting the chamber of commerce and band boosters for a generation or more — gets nothing.

• Homeowners get something called "circuit breaker" rebates. When their property taxes exceed 3.5 percent of household income, they get part or all of the excess rebated — to the tune of \$600 million — when they file their state income tax returns.



Michigan's property tax system has become so burdensome and so complex that it's starting to unravel. It's much like the federal income tax law before the 1986 reform — high rates for some, loopholes for others.

That puts homeowners in an odd situation. Rebates give them an incentive to vote "yes" on property tax increases. But businesses pay property taxes, too, and they don't get circuit breaker rebates.

Both abatements and rebates have the same fault: They distort the property tax picture for particular groups.

• Auto makers and a utility are on the warpath over their industrial assessments. For the last few years, industry has been challenging those assessments before the State Tax Commission.

• The farm economy in central Michigan is in horrible shape, with foreclosures and falling assessments.

In short, Michigan's property tax system has become so burdensome and so complex that it's starting to unravel. It's much like the federal income tax law before the 1986 reform — high rates for some, loopholes for others.

• This system produces uneven resources for schools — \$1,700 per student in some, \$6,000 in others. There's a fairly wide consensus that we should be spending \$3,000 per student minimum.

The unevenness grows worse as industry becomes more capital-intensive in the high-tech era. School districts with high-tech plants are richer than ever.

THOSE ARE the chief complaints, as we see them.

Solutions are being offered from every political corner. Most are complicated. At this point, it's too early to pass judgment on one over another.

Besides, we have a melting pot called the state Legislature where 148 fairly good minds will distill, balance, sift through and mold a solution that will probably have to be approved by voters.

When that happens, we will be able to vote "yes" or "no" on a specific constitutional amendment.

Meanwhile, this newspaper recognizes that good schools are the highest priority of most readers, be they parents or employers. We know how you feel about property taxes, because we pay them, too.

Our reporting will give school finance top priority in the months ahead. And you now understand the direction we are all headed.

THANKS! NEWS ITEM—U.S. AND CANADA OK FREE TRADE PACT.

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Thanks, Neighbor!

Ditto, eh!

Help the Goodfellows help the downtrodden

DON'T BE fooled by the Farmington area's overall prosperity.

It may not rival the pervasive poverty in inner-city ghettos, but the lack of food or clothing is more prevalent in Farmington and Farmington Hills than you might think.

"About 15 percent of the homes within our 35 square miles are older homes and that's where the majority of low-income families live," says Dick Tupper, executive director of the Farmington Area Goodfellows.

For 40 years, the Goodfellows have helped make the holiday season brighter for needy families. Last year, the hardy band of volunteers delivered holiday baskets to 177 needy families and 120 low-income seniors, thanks to \$25,000 in contributions.

Best known around the holiday season, their spirit of service isn't limited to year-end activities.

They offer limited emergency assistance throughout the year to victims of fires, illnesses, accidents or layoffs. Plans call for consolidating certain services with the Salvation Army to better handle these emergencies.

Reinforcing the need for their special brand of "joy," the Goodfellows have no trouble dispensing their holiday baskets.

Each "basket of joy" typically contains canned foods and knitwear. Each includes gift certificates



Bob Sklar

redeemable for fresh food and winter clothing. Toys, games, dolls and children's clothing are included when appropriate.

FAMILY MAKEUP dictates the size and content of each basket. Potential recipients must document need. Special dietary requests are honored when practical.

How many baskets are made up hinges on how adept the Goodfellows are at rallying community support.

Cash is welcome but you may get a warmer feeling by donating something that goes directly to the less fortunate — canned or dried foods, a winter coat, a homemade toy, a knit scarf, a doll.

Virtually all cash donations come back to the community. About the only things the Goodfellows have to buy are stamps to mail solicitation letters and boxes to make into baskets.

A sure sign of success is when your cause is copied. And the Goodfellows' cause has proven worth emulating.

Many of the Goodfellows' major corporate contributors have been so deeply touched by the cause that they now deliver their own food baskets, toys or clothing at this time of year.

CLEARLY, THOSE of us more fortunate should make it our business to strive to assure no one goes hungry or without warm clothing during the holiday season.

By helping the Farmington Area Goodfellows, you'll undoubtedly be rewarded by knowing their good will helps ease the pangs among the downtrodden.

One glitch this year is lack of 3,000-square-foot, heated storefront or warehouse from where the Goodfellows can pack, store and distribute baskets. If you know of a local site available, rent free, from mid-October to mid-December, call the Farmington-Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce, 474-3440. A volunteer typist also is needed.

To donate to the Goodfellows, buy a Goodfellow newspaper at major intersections Friday, Nov. 27, or call the chamber.

If the thought of a hungry child or a shivering senior cranking an expansive smile when a Goodfellow pays a visit doesn't tug at your heartstrings, nothing will.

People helping people — plainly put, that's what the Goodfellows are all about.

Farmington readers' forum

Letters must be signed, original copies and include the address and telephone number of the writer. None can be returned. Names will be withheld from publication only for sufficient reason. Letters should be limited to 300 words in most cases. We reserve the right to edit them. Send letters to Readers' Forum, Farmington Observer, 33203 Grand River Ave., Farmington 48024.

Back Sever and Vagnozzi

To the editor:
When I first learned that there are nine candidates for four Farmington Hills City Council seats, I was overjoyed. At last, I thought, the election is starting to realize that government is open to participation by the governed.

When I read the views of the aspirants in the paper on Oct. 8, I was rather perplexed to see that some of them had not done their homework: the study of zoning variances so residential and business properties will remain in the proper balance; zoning changes are proposed by the planning commission and final disposition is made by the council; zoning variances can only be granted by the board of zoning appeals and are appealed only in Circuit Court.

The incumbents seem to say, "Hey! we've done a pretty good job, but let's not make too many waves." One candidate seems to have a refreshing approach, and even though I have not (and still don't) agree with him on everything, he expounds certain views that merit attention by all. His name? Aldo Vagnozzi.

I have known Aldo for a number of years and know him to be a man of integrity with the courage of his convictions. He is also an astute and articulate observer of his environs.

Aldo's election to the council would ensure openness with those

things of which he had knowledge. Aspersions about the city of Southfield substantiate my belief that even though our goals may be different, Farmington Hills could profit from our sister city's experience.

Mr. Sever has matured in his approach to issues and seems to be open to rational ideas.

A vote for Vagnozzi and Sever would serve our city well.

George Roberts
Farmington Hills

Vote Fox to council

To the editor:
As you reported, I decided not to seek re-election to the Farmington Hills City Council this fall. I am writing now to explain that decision.

I hope I was considered to be a good council member and that, in a positive way, I contributed to Farmington Hills as a city and as a community. I fought for what I thought was right and take some pride, along with our residents, for some of the significant developments in Farmington Hills, such as lowering taxes three times in those eight years. Neighborhood Watch and our Natural Beauty Road Ordinance.

I am leaving the council because of time restraints. My involvement in the presidential race, added consulting work and other business activities will not allow me the time required for city council work.

I am staying in Farmington Hills and will continue to be active in community and political activities. In the 6th Precinct, naturally, I will continue to serve as Republican precinct delegate.

Finally, one of the reasons I deliberated about leaving the council is that I was concerned about the tax-and-spend liberal philosophy of some council members. I wanted to keep a conservative voice on the council. I was very pleased that this conservative voice came forward in the person of Jean Fox. Her election this fall will assure us that we, the people, will be well represented on all issues.

Jean Fox will be new to the council, and that is good! For the past 15 years, Jean Fox has helped me fight those who would turn our city into parking lots, traffic jams and high-rises. She believes in Farmington Hills' unique residential character and is committed to keeping our community a very special place in which to live. With her experience in both government and business, Jean Fox is the one candidate who can do just that.

That is why I am wholeheartedly supporting Jean Fox for city council, and I hope Farmington Hills residents will vote for her on Nov. 3.

It has been a good eight years working in and for the city on council, and I will miss it. I want to thank the people of Farmington Hills for their support.

Donna L. Wolf, councilman,
Farmington Hills

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