

points of view

Watching the courts offers a slice of life

TRUTH CAN be stranger than fiction, which can be proved by sitting in an Oakland County courtroom on any day, and at any time.

I've watched the unique ways Oakland County judges run their courtrooms in a number of cases during the past 24 years. Each brings his or her own brand of decision-making to the bench.

In the most recent experience, I find Oakland County Circuit Judge Francis O'Brien is no exception.

He runs a tight ship. Attorneys better be prepared, and they better know their law. In several cases during the past week, he had to lead



Casey Hans

counselors through pre-trial conferences by the nose.

Because of his busy docket, O'Brien was required to sandwich numerous cases, civil and criminal, between a murder/arson trial that began in late January. Testimony and arguments in that Farmington

Hills case, where a man is charged with murdering his wife and setting fire to their house in 1985, was interesting in itself.

But even the good judge was left somewhat speechless during a couple of cases which, under normal circumstances, would be considered minor ones.

TAKE THE simple divorce action brought before Judge O'Brien.

A young man sought an annulment from his marriage, because his wife was sitting in the Macomb County Jail awaiting trial on charges of murdering her first husband.

He knew nothing about the first

husband, or the details surrounding his death when he married this woman, he said.

He felt he'd been duped, not to mention his concern with living for a few more years in slight of the charges.

Oh, and don't forget the kids. He had adopted the woman's twins, but was willing to give up custody to the maternal grandmother. He simply wanted to wash his hands of the situation, and the judge agreed.

Fraudulent intent was proved, and the annulment granted.

But wait. There's more. A third attorney jumped into the discussion,

advising that a sister and parents of the deceased, natural father were petitioning for custody and visitation rights.

CONFUSED? To me, it's perfectly clear. This case offers a decent plot line and enough characters to begin writing my first daytime soap.

Court-watching generates a multitude of such ideas, and best of all, it costs nothing. I'm even paid to sit and absorb information, on occasion.

One watcher at the murder/arson trial this week wondered aloud if he could observe another trial before a different judge. Anyone can sit in on any trial, with the exception of a ju-

venile case, which the judge may rule closed to the public.

There are district, or local courts, in each community, and circuit courts at the county level. Not only can the public sit in on testimony, but transcripts from open court are also public information that can be reviewed upon request.

Everyone with the time, and the patience, should make the effort to watch our judicial system at work.

Not only does it offer fodder for budding writers, but it provides us all with a generous slice of life and a different view of how our world operates.

Renewal: not only an urban need

OUTSIDE MY window construction equipment rumbles and roars, gouging out a new future for this newspaper. The trees are being cut down, the earth removed and land plotted.

In many ways our new construction exemplifies what is happening all over the suburbs.

And while seeing a tree being cut down does cause a bit of sadness, watching our company grow makes all the years' efforts feel like time well spent.

We need to renew. And sometimes that means doing away with the old and building for the future. It's a lesson that many metropolitan areas have already learned and from which they are reaping the benefits — much to our detriment.

THE SUBURBAN Detroit area is

slow in coming around. Perhaps newness scares folks. But we really have to stop being frightened.

For years now, we have lived in a metropolitan area whose infrastructure has combatted the obvious — that to remain vital, a city must change, grow, develop and, most importantly of all, renew.

Many of our suburban communities are facing that same quandary today. Citizens groups are sprouting up all over, proclaiming the sanctity of the American bedroom community. Bedroom communities might have



Steve Barnaby

Bedroom communities might have been good 20 years ago. But they will be worthless 20 years hence.

been good 20 years ago. But they won't be good for anything 20 years hence.

Believe it or not, Livonia was new. Not so many years ago, really. And people laughed.

"Who, after all, would want to go and live out in that God-forsaken wilderness?" the skeptics queried. They were wrong, of course. Just as they were wrong about the need for Cobo Hall, Joe Louis Arena and (excuse me while I chuckle) the Palace in Auburn Hills.

Now not everything that is new is necessarily good for the growth of

the metropolitan area. But Detroit, more than any other metro area, has cheated itself by denying the need for developing a well-rounded metropolitan area.

THANKFULLY, SOME folks take the bull by the horns and make sure the renewal process carries us through. Henry Ford II did that. Little Caesar's Mike Ilitch is doing it today by investing his money in the Fox project in Detroit.

But the central city isn't the only place that needs to be renewed. Look around at your community. Frankly, what's good for today won't be worth anything for your children if planning stops at next year or the year after. We must think about 20 years from now.

We do need to leave a legacy for our children, a legacy of a well-planned community that is competitive with the rest of midwestern America. And to be competitive, we will need better planning, forged through cooperation between communities.

The goal shouldn't be to stop development, but to map it out in an orderly fashion.

As suburban communities grow they need their own hotels, convention facilities, business and mercantile centers. We are becoming more than just extensions of a major city, we are becoming a metropolis unto ourselves.

House: It's like boot camp

SOME DAYS I don't see how guys like John Bennett of Redford, Bill Keith of Garden City, Sandy Brotherton of Farmington and Dick Young of Dearborn Heights can stand it.

They're state representatives who have been around 15 or 20 years or more. And the Michigan House of Representatives operates much like military boot camp.

Boot camp is a game of hurry up and wait — you rush someplace and stand in line for two hours. That's tolerable when you're 18 or 20 years old and know it's going to end in a few weeks. But when you're a veteran, it becomes a royal pain, not to mention a waste of taxpayers' money and your own time.

THE HOUSE leadership — that's Speaker Gary Owen, D-Ypsilanti, and cadre — put the brakes last week on the Senate's effort to pass three educational quality bills.

Those bills stemmed from the 1987 Harden Commission report to the state Board of Education. They had to do with kindergarten through 12th-grade public school curriculum, long-range planning and an educational improvement report to the public.

Now, those measures (SB 547-549) were reported out of the Senate Education Committee on 4-0 bipartisan votes with one member absent. There are constitutional elements, but they won't be debated because two of the measures couldn't make it



Tim Richard

to the Senate floor.

Owen's position is to throw the educational quality bills, along with Gov. Jim Blanchard's "tax equity" package, into a 16-member joint committee of senators and representatives and negotiate the entire package. All the Senate Democrats and enough Republicans went along to delay all three bills.

I'VE HAD a gut feeling about the House for a long time, but Senate Majority Leader John Engler, R-Mount Pleasant, finally put it into words.

"The House leadership treats its members like children," Engler said in a conversation last week. "It stifles debate. It serves the people who run it."

OK, so Engler is a partisan. But he's absolutely correct. Attend any sessions of the House and Senate at random and you'll notice:

• The Senate debates bills, and you hear plenty from both sides. Only a handful of House members speak. On the day in question, the Senate spent nearly three hours debating bills while the House floor

leader announced, barely an hour into the session, "there will be no more voting today."

• The Senate moves bills promptly — as evidenced by the effort to pass the educational quality bills. The House stores them in committee and lets them sit on the calendar for months, passing them in a rush at the end of the session. Notice the length of the House calendar.

• Senators have a tendency to debate a bill on its merits, then vote it up or down. The House leadership plays power broker by tying many bills together and vote-swapping under pressure of deadline.

BLANCHARD'S posture in this is disappointing.

In five years as governor, he has demonstrated strong interest in education. Yet before he will allow any educational quality bills to become law, he insists — "first," to use his own words — that his "tax equity" package be passed.

You know that four-year-old package: more taxes on banks, more taxes on insurers, a tax on lottery winnings, a tax on military pay and so on — \$250 million worth.

Well, in three tries, Blanchard hasn't been able to get it passed, so now he and Owen are holding the educational quality bills hostage in order to get "tax equity" passed.

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