

# Opinion

33203 Grand River/Farmington, MI 48024

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## Governing Council elected to represent

WE DON'T subscribe to former councilman Donn Wolf's position that Farmington Hills taxes should never be raised without a vote of the people.

Wolf argues that the 10-mill property tax limit set by the charter commission 15 years ago does not mean "you can juggle figures and laws around to impose a tax on our residents without their express approval."

His argument came in a position statement opposing Farmington Hills' .14-mill tax rate boost to 9.4 mills for 1988-89. Last year, the council lowered the tax rate by 1.1 mills.

A Republican candidate for the Oakland County Board of Commissioners 27th District seat, representing most of the Farmington area, Wolf ably talks up conservatism in municipal budgeting.

But his reasoning doesn't mesh with what we call representative democracy.

Council members are elected to represent their constituency as outlined by the city charter. The responsibility includes setting a yearly tax rate up to the 10-mill limit, which passed muster when voters approved the charter.

The tax rate is levied only after a hearing where residents can stand up and say, "Show me why, despite increasing revenue from rising property assessments, you still need to raise the tax rate!"

TO BETTER prepare residents for asking tough questions like that, we urge the council to better publicize budget study sessions. As councilman Aldo Vagnozzi put it, "That's where the information comes in on the rationale for the various budget items."

In its wisdom when 15- or 20-mill tax rate limits were the rage, Farmington Hills' charter commission set a 10-mill maximum. Because of the Headlee Tax Limitation Amendment, that's now slightly lower.

The low tax rate limit acts as a hedge against unbridled taxation in a city where property assessments, the other key in determining actual taxes, are rising relentlessly in many neighborhoods.

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If assessments tail off and service costs climb, the city could face the prospect of a tax rate higher than 10 mills to balance its budget. But a popular vote would have to precede any change in the tax rate limit.

THAT'S THE beauty of the city charter. It gives the council leeway to raise or lower the tax rate only within a prescribed limit.

Council members are elected by and serve at the pleasure of the voters. Their charge is to make decisions on taxation and services for the entire city — Yuppies, seniors, the low income.

The quickest way to fight an unjustified tax increase, and guard against similar acts of misfeasance, is to send the rascals packing in the next city election.

Looking back, meager turnouts at budget hearings and council elections seem to underscore that most of the 68,000 residents believe their city leaders do act responsibly in planning the yearly budget and tax rate.

We can't believe that the meager turnouts, amid the hue and cry over property assessments, signal apathy.

So when only eight residents take the time to speak out after weeks of coverage about city spending, it's hard to substantiate insensitivity by the budget preparers.

Give council members, your elected representatives, flexibility in setting tax rates within the charter limit. But hold them strictly accountable for each year's levy.

## Fireworks Tougher safety rules needed

IT IS DIFFICULT to separate the Fourth of July and fireworks. Colorful, majestic, booming displays seemingly cascade from the heavens to the delight and glee of adults and children alike.

But the fireworks are not just beautiful, they are also high explosive shells that are propelled by the force of gunpowder. They are dangerous and require extreme caution.

Yet in Michigan, it can be argued that the laws governing the use of firecrackers such as cherry bombs and M-80s are more restrictive than those governing major fireworks shows. In reality there are no restrictions other than those placed by individual communities when preparing for a Fourth of July show.

A BILL introduced by Sen. Fred Dillingham, R-Fowlerville, would change that. Dillingham, who lives in Livingston County to the west, first introduced similar legislation when he was in the house. His action came after a teenager was killed when a Brighton fireworks shell misfired and landed in a crowd. The tragic irony of the death was that the girl was attending the show because her father had convinced her that a municipal show was safer than an unregulated and illegal fireworks display planned by a neighbor.

Dillingham's bill (SB 183) is a start in that it

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encourages standards and would require those who shoot fireworks to pass a test administered by the Michigan State Police. But it does not go nearly far enough and, what's worse, it seems as though the bill is getting little serious attention.

Stringent measures are needed for several reasons: the safety of those attending fireworks displays; the safety of those shooting off the fireworks; and the continuation of an American tradition dating to the birth of the nation. If fireworks are not safe, insurance costs alone will continue to thin the ranks of fireworks displays.

A MAJOR problem is the experience of those firing the shells. Some companies that run fireworks shows provide comprehensive training; but since the bulk of fireworks displays comes only once a year, there is always the danger that inexperienced help are answering a cattle call for employment.

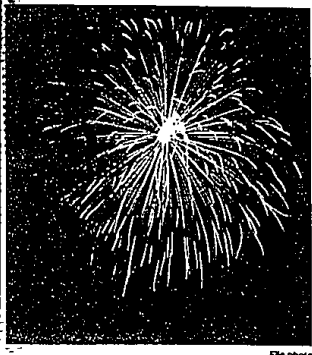
A test by itself is not sufficient. Such a test is required in Ohio and is disdained by some major companies there, including American Fireworks, which is in charge of the July Fourth display from the Detroit River. A spokesman there tells of a woman who had never fired off a shell but who still scored 95 percent on the test. Book learning just isn't enough, he said.

A state fireworks law needs to set specific standards that define at least these items: quality of shells, pyrotechnic training for those running the show, direction of shells, trajectory of shells, and location and distance of audience. The law also needs to ensure that those firing the shells have practical experience and can judge competently such changing factors as wind conditions.

There also needs to be clearcut directions for when a show should be suspended. The shell that killed the girl in Brighton was the second shell to misfire that night.

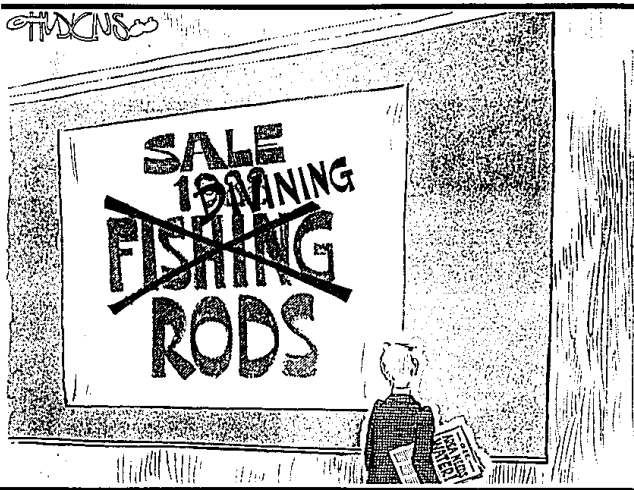
Finally, there needs to be reliable record-keeping centered in the state's Fire Marshal office. Right now it is difficult if not impossible to track down fireworks-related injuries.

Fireworks are rightfully enjoyed by many as a celebration of the nation's birth. The state Legislature needs to move promptly to ensure that the celebration does not carry unnecessary risks.



File photo

Fireworks are colorful, majestic and dangerous. But there are no restrictions other than those placed by individual communities when preparing for a Fourth of July show.



## Keep campaign clean for state House race

THEY OWE it to their prospective constituents to keep the race for Farmington Republican Sandy Brotherton's state House seat squeaky clean.

Already, tales of one camp trying to discourage another from running have surfaced. At least one candidate has had a car publicizing his candidacy vandalized.

Given our community's emphasis on cultural awareness, it would be hypocritical if ethnicity and age, easy potential targets, become issues.

So far, political lawn signs, which some of the six candidates are using, have survived intact. A grass-roots tradition in American politics, let's hope they don't incur the wrath of vandals.

Bluntly put, there's no place for sniping in the campaign to replace Brotherton, retiring after 14 years as a lawmaker.

INSTEAD OF maneuvering to trip up an opponent, I'd urge the candidates and their committees to concentrate on issues: taxation, public school financing, educational requirements, highway improvements, health care, small business needs,



**Bob Sklar**

utility regulation, criminal justice reform, right to die legislation, mental health, regionalism, drug enforcement.

I'd much rather hear what they have to say about those things than about an opponent's campaign strategy, financial support, family heritage or political ambitions.

Naïve they're not. Voters have the smarts to figure out what's the catalyst for a candidate for the \$39,831-a-year state House seat.

They know a legitimate candidate when they see one — namely, someone more interested in representing a constituency than in advancing a political career.

AS THE Observer editorialized on March 24, voters should slice through the politicking in sizing up

Republicans Michael Bouchard, Jan Dolan, Mike Sarafa and Paul Weiday and Democrats John Dolan and Kenneth Murray.

They should look for someone strong enough to withstand incessant pressure from opportunists and lobbyists peddling special interests to earn a paycheck or score political points.

They should look for someone long on leadership, integrity, sensitivity and vigor — and short on political debts.

MEANWHILE, JUST because it's a midterm vote, don't pooch-pooch the primary.

With contested Republican and Democratic races, each vote will matter. What's more, the district is heavily Republican so victory in August on the GOP side will be a giant stride toward election in November.

So in planning summer vacations, voters should make it their business to vote Tuesday, Aug. 2 — either in person or by absentee ballot. Don't let a scant turnout decide who will be this community's next state representative.

## 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.

## Tax increase is not needed

To the editor:

Farmington Hills is indeed in a very fortunate position. With a never-growing population, now up to 76,000, and continued expansion of business and office firms, as well as untoward multiple and condominium developments, we are the envy of many of our neighbors.

Indeed our state equalized value, upon which taxes are levied, has increased in just one year from \$1.5 billion to \$1.775 billion, an increase of \$275 million. This puts our city third or fourth highest in increased SEV in the state, a position unheard of for hundreds of other municipalities in Michigan.

Part of this increase in SEV in the city came from raising assessments 10-15 percent on residential property in the city. Indeed, some individuals found themselves with a 20 percent increase.

When assessments go up so dramatically, it behooves responsible city officials to carefully consider the tax rate levy, which is the other 50 percent of the city's annual tax bill to the citizens it serves.

I question the statement that the city budget cannot be balanced at 7.9544 operating mills.

It would seem to me as just one councilman the city could keep the millage at last year's rate of 9.25 mills instead of raising it to the proposed 9.4.

Even keeping the rate stable means an extra \$2.3 million in revenues to the city coffers. Because of the 10-20 percent increased assessments, most citizens will pay \$20,000 more to the city on their homes. This does not include the 10-20 per-

cent higher county and school taxes, which also go up because of the increase in assessed valuations.

My own taxes will go up \$60 for Farmington Hills alone in 1989. While I might well feel the city is worth this, there are many of our citizens who do not share this viewpoint.

Therefore, I would urge my fellow councilmen to be prudent to at least keep the millage level at the same rate as 1988 if they are unwilling to lower it to offset the rising assessments in this city.

Jean Fox, councilwoman,  
Farmington Hills

## Spelling bees — exploitative

To the editor:

Parents: Don't encourage your children to get into a state or national spelling bee; they will be exploited.

The National Spelling Bee is run by newspapers whose top management feels that it is good publicity, but it exploits the children.

Innocent students study and grind for months, even years, working on esoteric, technical, never-heard-of words which always constitute the final rounds of state or national spelling bees. These are words the students will never use.

Forty-nine out of the 50 contestants go home frustrated and disappointed. Don't let this happen to your child.

Extended (including technical) English contains about 600,000 words, easily half of which are quite technical. Here is a list of words

missed by Michigan contestants in the recent National Spelling Bee:

- lichenous — (growing in stony places)
- immitance — (archaic: a sending)
- calyculus — (a cup-shaped structure)
- mistissini — (a primrose)

Spelling bees are for drudges, grinds, for the non-creative. Creative, able, alert kids do not enter spelling bees because they have much better use for their time. They see that the rewards, educational or financial, do not stack up to the immense time investment demanded.

We don't have "arithmetic bees" because our number system is regular. If we reformed our inconsistent spelling, these ridiculous spelling bees would be outmoded and our children could get on much faster with the important challenges of education.

Abraham F. Citroni,  
Bloomfield Hills

## Fine coverage draws thanks

To the editor:

Thank you for the very fine coverage you have given the all-night graduation parties for the Farmington high schools.

Your efforts go a long way in making the community aware of what a fine undertaking these parties are and encourage better attendance and community support.

Estelle Ritterling, parent,  
Farmington High School

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