

# Opinion

33203 Grand River/Farmington, MI 48024 Robert Sklar editor/477-5450

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## Studying up Marks incident spurs lessons

**L**ESSONS ABOUND from the incident involving Farmington Hills councilman Ben Marks and the favored treatment he received to pay off a 1½-year-old business debt to the city.

As councilman Terry Sever put it, we can never overstate "the idea that we need to run above-board."

While mayor, Marks arranged for late payment of a \$17,000 sewer tap-in fee for his new office building after he wrote a check that didn't clear. He wrote the check in anticipation of mortgage financing for his new office building, across from the Farmington Hills City Hall.

When the expected financing was delayed, Marks put city manager William Costick in the sticky position of deciding whether to put the debt on Marks' 1987 tax bill, thereby placing a lien on the property, or keeping it as a receivable, with interest and penalties accruing.

Costick, in a decision he has apologized for, chose to keep it a receivable only after Marks assured him payment was coming.

Marks paid the debt last month — after it came to public light and after he secured the elusive mortgage financing.

**MARKS.** A longtime civic booster, didn't intend to defraud the city. But he was wrong for not bringing his financial predicament to the city council. And he was wrong for using his influence as mayor to ask the city manager for a favor.

The episode hurt the entire council's credibility. Councilwoman Jan Dolan put it well: "Public officials, elected or appointed, hold a trust that should be held to the highest standard. It's important there's not even the appearance of misuse of that trust."

What's most disconcerting is that many city employees knew about the bounced check. Yet no one saw fit to step forward and alert the city council to the favored treatment that followed.

Trying to understand the rash of closed lips around city hall, Sever said: "I think maybe in their everyday workings for the city and they're

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— councilwoman Jan Dolan

feelings for confidentiality, they didn't want to be the one to bring it out."

If that's true, the question is, "Why the apprehension?"

Take it from Sever, who said, "We should give the confidence to the people who work for this city that anything is not wrong to bring forward to the city manager or the city council."

**WHAT COULD** the council have done if it had learned about the now-infamous check earlier?

For starters, it could have insulated Costick from the politics of making a decision involving one of his bosses. Instead of designating the debt a receivable, Costick could have routinely placed it on Marks' 1987 tax bill.

Obviously, we need to work harder to instill within city employees the confidence needed to treat everyone fairly — without fear of reprisal.

Mayor Jody Soronen's memo to employees should help do just that. She reminded that city policy forbids special privileges — for anyone.

Putting the episode into perspective, Costick, a fine city manager, admitted his mistake, then said: "I hope we can put all this behind us. I hope we'll be a better city for it. We all have our city at heart."

The silver lining in this stormy cloud is not only the admission of wrongdoing, but also the assurance by city leaders that the policies and procedures designed to prevent such a blunder will be strictly enforced.

## Tuition rollback Blanchard gets the job done

**F**OR A FEW short years in the 1830s, Michigan had an accountable university system.

There was just one university with one board of regents. It was empowered to set up many branches. But you knew who was in charge. If you didn't like any part of the system, such as high tuition, you went after the board of regents. It was that simple.

The system fell apart in the Jackson Depression. All the university branches except the one in Ann Arbor were shut down.

In later decades, when more universities and "normal schools," as they called teachers' colleges in those days, were formed, they were given autonomous boards.

Today we have three universities with eight elected trustees — 24 in all — and 12 others with boards appointed by the governor.

**LAST MONTH** Gov. James J. Blanchard used his budget powers to bring the meandering, amorphous system under control.

Threatening to veto portions of the budgets of those universities that raised tuition more than 10 percent in one year, he blueprinted Oakland University, the University of Michigan and several others into rolling back their tuition increases into the single digits.

It was a nasty job, but someone had to do it. Not one voter in 500 can name more than one trustee of any of the state universities. The governor made few friends among the trustees, many of whom were his appointees and many others from his political party. He endured a lot of snarling and gnashing of teeth from the presidents. But Blanchard got the job done.

Tuitions have been rising faster than parents' cost-of-living pay increases, faster than corporate dividends, faster than the minimum wages for which teenagers work.

**THE GOVERNOR** was forced into it, to be sure. He didn't do it out of pure courage.

He is the proud sponsor of a program called the Michigan Education Trust under which people can pre-pay a small amount into a fund that is invested and earns enough to cover a youngster's four years of tuition down the line.

But tuition were rising faster than the MET — or any other fund — could earn interest. So Blanchard simply blueprinted the universities into cutting cost.

As it turned out, the political fallout was almost non-existent. Blanchard could have gone on the stump against, for example, U-M Regent Nellie Varner, a Democrat who voted for the 12 percent increases there. But the issue was defused when the U-M board rolled back to the single digits.

**TIMES HAVE** changed in Michigan, and university trustees had better begin reading the newspapers instead of just the reports they get from campus presidents.

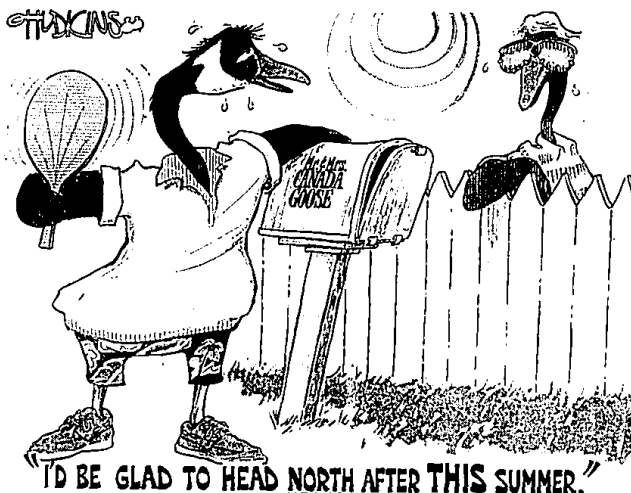
There are almost no more GIs going to school on their Bill of Rights. In Washington, the Reagan Administration has targeted the neediest kids for grants, which was fine. But that left kids from the lower middle class vulnerable to tuition increases.

No longer can university officials jack up tuitions at will and point to Uncle Sam as an ever-flowing jug of milk, as in the ancient story of Philemon and Baucis.

The man who founded the university system in the 1830s was John D. Pierce. The ordinary politician doesn't know Pierce's name, but students of educational history know him as a giant.

If Blanchard can make his work stick, he may wind up as an equal giant in Michigan history. Making the universities accountable and responsive — say, that's an historic achievement.

The governor was forced into using his power, to be sure. He didn't do it out of pure courage. He is the proud sponsor of a program called the Michigan Education Trust under which people can pre-pay into a fund. The money they pay is invested and earns enough to cover four years of tuition down the line. Blanchard and state treasurer Robert Bowman (left) traveled throughout the state last month promoting the MET.



## Help pick community's '88 Citizen of the Year

**IT HAS** aptly been described as flowers to the living.

That's because the Citizen of the Year Award, presented by the Farmington/Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce, is a great way to say thanks to someone who has worked to improve or uplift some aspect of the community.

The 1988 recipient will be honored Thursday, Oct. 23, at the chamber's 18th annual awards banquet.

The Citizen of the Year Award honors a community booster who has built a record of extended and resourceful public service, particularly during the past year.

The distinctive award helps recognize community activists who go out of their way to help others as well as lesser-known folks dedicated to volunteer service.

It also helps alert people thinking about civic involvement that their efforts indeed could earn the spotlight. Although we often won't admit it, most of us thrive when appreciated. We tend to be more enterprising and productive after a pat on the back.



Bob Sklar

**IN PREVIOUS** years, Citizen of the Year nominees often came from the ranks of the many service groups that enrich the community year-round.

But nominees aren't limited to group members. Typically, nominees have differing backgrounds and interests. They represent a host of lifestyles.

In siding up potential nominees, exclude past award winners. Government officials can be nominated for volunteer achievements only. They're in the limelight enough as public servants.

Don't hesitate to nominate past nominees who weren't winners but who are still deeply active in the community.

Past winners comprise a "Who's

Who" of some of our community's most dedicated fans.

Do your part in the search for the next Citizen of the Year. Think about what your friends, neighbors and acquaintances are doing — or have done recently. One of them just might deserve the award.

**TOO MANY** times, community workers who merit public recognition don't receive it. The Citizen of the Year Award is designed to correct that. Consider it your civic duty to nominate someone.

Nominees can be anyone who has contributed meritorious service to the community either as a volunteer or in connection with their business. Residency is not a prerequisite. Call the chamber office for a nominating form: 474-3440. Forms must be returned by Oct. 3.

Be sure to specify why your nominee's achievements should earn special plaudits.

Honoring folks who work selflessly to bolster the lot of others is what the Citizen of the Year Award is really about.

Who measures up in your eyes?

## 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.

### Tuition hikes serious issue

**To the editor:**  
With reference to your Aug. 11 edition of the Farmington Observer, the article on the front page with large block letters saying, "Area students quietly accept tuition hikes" and then continued on page 4, saying "Students undared by hikes," is not an opinion shared by myself and many others with whom I have spoken.

I doubt that Mr. Drew McDougall, to whom the article often refers, is hardly representative of many college and university students from this area. I am referring to the fact that his parents are paying for his tuition to the University of Michigan, along with his room and board.

He is earning money doing summer jobs to cover incidental expenses such as movies and restaurants. He is a very lucky young man to have parents who are able to do this for him; but I do not think that he is representative of a lot of our Farmington young people.

We have a daughter who is working very hard to put herself through Eastern Michigan University with very little help from us except when it is absolutely necessary.

She lives at home and commutes every day to Ypsilanti so that she may save money on living expenses and also so that she may keep her job at a local pediatrician's office. Her teaching degree will come about as a result of many sacrifices on her part and she is very grateful to us.

Yes, the tuition hikes are a very serious issue with us as we still have two more children to educate —

more years of sacrifices — but we will manage with a cooperative effort on both of our parts. We are thankful for the Michigan Education Trust, which will help with college for our 6-year-old son, when the time comes.

Mr. & Mrs. Richard T. Latimer,  
Farmington Hills

### Offices would kill the trees

**To the editor:**  
I wonder if your readers are aware that the legislators plan to build underground offices in the front of the Capitol Building.

If they proceed with their plans, many of the beautiful old trees on the Capitol grounds will die. They are old trees and their tap roots are deep and extend far out. Tree experts have told me that any damage to these trees will cause them to die.

Some of the trees are as old as the Capitol building. The Capitol Building and grounds are enhanced by these trees, many of which flower in the spring.

In addition to destroying the trees, building underground costs three times as much as surface building. The state will undoubtedly bond for any building program. This will make the cost almost six times as much as surface building. The state already owns much buildable land in Lansing.

I would like to encourage your readers to contact their representatives, senators and state officials and encourage them not to proceed with their plan to build underground.

Lucile Beien,  
Lansing City Council

### Young man is dedicated

**To the editor:**  
In your article on Billy Gabel, Carrier of the Month, you mentioned "he likes meeting and serving people." This couldn't be closer to the truth.

I am a recent Farmington resident and purchased a slightly rundown home. Tearing apart the inside, cutting down trees, removing shrubs, etc., became a bit much for me to handle.

Billy offered one day to cut the tree branches and shrubs down to size so that they could be placed for garbage pickup.

He did not request any money, gave up a couple of his evenings and weekend days and did a thorough and excellent job.

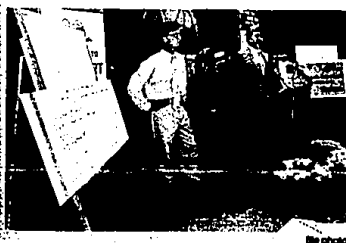
Needless to say, he was paid for his work; however, I was impressed with his willingness to help someone that he did not know (I had only seen him a couple of times) and with his diligent, hard work.

I still subscribe to the Farmington Observer, not so much for the paper (I also receive it at work), but because of the young man that delivers it.

His parents should be very proud of his dedication and kind spirit. I'm glad he was chosen as July Carrier of the Month.

Billy has also offered to cut my lawn along with numerous other chores. Where does he ever find the time?

Heather Richter,  
Farmington



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