

Opinion

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

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On the stump Schools must sell bond issue

IN JANUARY, Farmington Public Schools voters will consider a bond issue substantially smaller than one they rejected by 218 votes in September.

But just because it's smaller, that's no reason to think the new bond proposal will automatically pass in a special election Tuesday, Jan. 31. We hope district officials clearly understand that.

They seem to. Superintendent Graham Lewis and school board president John Cotton vow an aggressive campaign for the desired \$7.3 million in bonds to build an elementary on the district's fast-growing west side.

The strategy, announced Tuesday, includes three district informational meetings. That's a wise tack, given 70 percent of the voters don't have children in the schools. These voters typically aren't as sensitive to goings-on in the schools as parents of school-age children. Relying on mailings to inform them seems risky.

Besides, school officials face some hurdles that district informational meetings might help offset.

When the school board last summer first proposed \$7 million in bonds for an elementary and early childhood center on the west side and another \$20 million in bonds to tackle districtwide safety needs, we urged separate ballot questions. Combining the bond requests made it impossible to pinpoint what voters later rejected: the school buildings, the safety improvements, or both?

A combined issue also made it impossible to measure the influence of Farmington Hills Insurance executive Richard Headlee, who called for building a new school with cash reserves and using the general fund to pay for safety improvements.

IN OUR view, the school board has no choice but to go back to voters for a smaller bond issue just to build the new elementary.

A new school is essential. Overcrowding has become acute in at least five of the 11 elemen-

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taries. Elementary enrollment is up 54 this year and is projected to rise through 1993.

Even Headlee, chief critic of the September bond proposal, agreed in principle there's "tremendous logic" for a new school.

If voters say yes in January, there's a chance the new school — nestled in a rolling, wooded nook on 11 Mile east of Halsted — could still open by September 1990, the original target date.

Contrary to what some may think, the district can't use voter-approved operating money, budgeted or in reserve, to build a new school — clearly a capital project.

And there's not nearly enough uncommitted money in the district's capital fund to cover the \$7-million-plus cost.

SHORT OF maybe borrowing the money and using some of its county-allocated millage for a period of years to pay off the loan — a method that would siphon money ticketed for operations — the district has no other payment options.

Overcrowding touches, to some extent, every one of the elementarys. It requires a districtwide solution — namely, a west-side school.

But the burden to sell the scaled-down bond proposal should be on the administration and the school board, not the building principals.

That's why we look forward to well-attended, fact-filled district informational meetings.

We trust that school officials will shed defensive preconceptions and fully answer questions. We also trust that voters will consider a west-side school objectively — and not hold our community's youth hostage in the face of ever-rising taxes.

School finance Fair funding is key to reform

IT SHOULD come as no surprise that Gov. James Blanchard's last-minute school reform proposal crashed and burned during the waning hours of the legislative session. After all, the last 20 years have produced no solutions to one of the state's most pressing problems.

But that doesn't reduce the crisis, nor the serious ramifications in store for the entire state if state government leaders continue to flounder in their sometimes half-hearted attempts to square the way in which public schools are funded.

The need for a solution should be obvious for many reasons, but here are the main two:

• One, the quality of a child's education is too dependent on his or her address, or rather the wealth of property in that child's school district. Some districts can spend almost \$7,000 per child, others barely \$2,000. That inequity is not necessarily reflective of the willingness of district residents to tax themselves. Many districts in affluent areas with more money per pupil actually have a lower school tax rate than do poorer districts.

• Two, in the face of such glaring unfairness, it is only a matter of time before courts are asked to intervene where the state legislature has failed. Such observers as Bloomfield Hills Superintendent Robert Docking and state Rep. Judith Miller, R-Birmingham, have predicted that the matter will ultimately be settled in the courts. State Sen. Daniel DeGrow, R-Port Huron, says he expects an anti-tax revolt in the legislature to soon file a federal court lawsuit to challenge the school finance plan as a violation of equal protection. The danger here is that the court may order a dramatic, ham-handed approach that could equalize spending at the expense of wealthier districts, thus lowering the overall state of public education in Michigan.

The solution isn't easy, but it is imperative that a fair, reasoned, effective plan be adopted before the courts are forced into the game. Here's how such a solution can be reached:

• Stop the finger pointing. Some blame the

It's necessary that lawmakers recognize the importance of having a strong public education system and the fairness of equalizing educational opportunities for all our children.

Michigan Education Association for the inaction, others say it is the state chamber of commerce that puts up the roadblocks. It is high time that leaders of political parties quit trying to win political points (and gubernatorial elections) and instead show their cooperative leadership abilities by emphasizing to all interested parties the importance of a fair, reasonable solution.

• Quit confusing property tax reform with school aid funding. The two are definitely related, but it is inviting disaster to sell one as the solution to the other. Gov. Blanchard's proposal did move a longstanding issue off dead center, but it seemed far too concerned with reducing property taxes with a shift to sales tax and far too vague on reducing the spending disparity among schools.

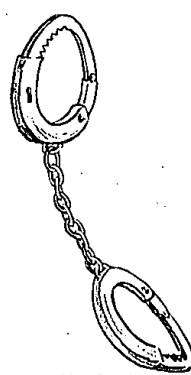
• Admit publicly that an increase in revenue for schools is an inevitable part of a meaningful solution. Maybe that includes a shift from property taxes, which are relatively high in Michigan, to the regressive sales tax, which is relatively low but likely to be palatable, especially since it will nick non-Michigan tourists. But the solution also must include a net gain in revenue, not just a shift. Blanchard's plan depended too much on a healthy Michigan economy continuing its unprecedented expansion. His wariness of proposing a flat-out tax hike is understandable considering the multitude of Republican politicians waiting to hang a tax-and-spend collar on the governor. Such action by Republicans would be reprehensible and would kill reform; it is also evidence of the continuing paralysis in Lansing because of the state senate recalls earlier this decade.

This is such a complex and difficult issue that it is not easy or worthwhile to pinpoint the villains. What is necessary is that lawmakers recognize the importance of having a strong public education system and the fairness of equalizing educational opportunities for all our children.

A fair funding system is only a start — accountability, higher standards, and our schools are also needed. But little can happen until the funding gap is closed, and that must be done now by the legislature before it is done later by the courts.



IF YOU INSIST ON TYING ONE ON...



THE COPS WILL INSIST ON PUTTING THESE ON.



SO WHY NOT JUST TIE ONE OF THESE ON.

Council action lacking; challenge awaits Sever

LOOKING BEHIND the headlines: • I agree with councilman Aldo Vagnozzi.

The entire Farmington Hills City Council should have followed the seven applicants to fill the remaining 11 months of newly elected state representative Jan Dolan's council term.

Only Vagnozzi and councilwoman Jean Fox thought it was important enough to do so. They spent seven hours over two days querying the applicants on land use, municipal ethics and other pertinent topics.

Sure the council had personal resumes and personal impressions of each applicant at its disposal. But resumes and impressions are a far cry from looking applicants in the eye and asking them about the city's direction.

Councilman-elect Philip Arnold's credentials and integrity notwithstanding, I'm perplexed to know how you can evaluate a person's ability to set city policy without putting them on the hotseat and peppering them with some tough questions.

Interviews should have been held at a special council meeting. The public has a right to an up-close look at the people hoping to join the city's policy-making board. Besides, the council usually meets three times a month and only two meetings were scheduled for December.

The council members who said no



Bob Sklar

to interviews in effect said their minds were made up as soon as the period to apply ended.

They, in effect, said to heck with objectivity.

• After becoming mayor-elect of Farmington Hills Nov. 21, second-term councilman Terry Sever said he hopes the city council "can put together a game plan that will unite everyone and remind us... that the bottom line, 'What is best for Farmington Hills?'"

That bottom line, oft-repeated by Sever, seems to be his public service slogan. It'll be interesting to see how he applies the slogan when the mayor's chair, a hotseat, if there ever was one. Whatever the mayor says and does becomes magnified, no matter who's in the ceremonial post.

Come Jan. 1, you won't be just another council member, Terry. You'll be front and center — where the spotlight is hotter and the expectation is greater.

• Olde Town indeed has a nicer

name for Farmington Hills' old-

est neighborhood. Some Olde Town homes date back to the '20s. The area is the city's southeastermost square mile.

I agree with residents who say calling it Section 36, its position on the old township map, wrongly left the impression the area is blighted. In recent years, storm drains, sidewalks, street paving, home improvements and new houses have helped boost property values in the 17 subdivisions that make up Olde Town.

As resident Massie Kurzeja aptly put it, "It's a good area. It's just an old area."

Residents need to raise \$14,000 to post Olde Town entranceway signs. I trust that Mayor Jody Soronen fulfills her "solemn promise" to report on supportive funding options before the end of the year.

• Saturday will be the biggest day of the year for the Farmington Area Goodfellows. That's when they'll deliver baskets of joy to 130 needy families and 150 needy seniors, fulfilling their pledge: "No Child or Senior Citizen without a Christmas." Family makeup dictates the size and content of each basket.

The folk heroes behind the Good-

fellows are the selfless volunteers who solicit, pack and deliver food, clothing, knickwears, toys, stationery and other household or personal items. "Without them," said Goodfellows general chairman Dick Tupper, "we wouldn't be."

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.

No excuse to abuse a child

To the editor:

Lisa Steinberg is dead. But her story is being told. In New York, Joel Steinberg is on trial for allegedly beating her to death. Lisa died at the age of 6 of child abuse.

Whether it be in New York, Detroit or Farmington Hills, the tale of abuse is a sad one — one that is so sad it actually hurts.

I feel when a person beats a child to death, then reason should be tried for murder, then if found guilty, sent to the gas chamber. There is no excuse to abuse a child.

Others that abuse children and women, just lock them up and never let them out.

Vernon C. Klepinski,
Farmington Hills

Patients need house slippers

To the editor:

I have truly loved all your letters and cards, although due to the lack of stamps, I couldn't write you all. But none of you are forgotten and I am grateful.

Now I have another wish. But it isn't for myself. As I've said before,

this is a very sad place. The fault isn't with the staff, it's with families who have forgotten. One patient has been in nursing homes for over 30 years. Think that over!

My wish now is for someone to send house slippers with rubber soles (not for me) for patient use. The rubber soles are so that patients won't fall.

Send them to: Gayle Timiney, Director of Nursing, Williamsburg Care Center, 21017 Middlebelt, Farmington Hills 48024.

God bless you all.
Margaret McCall,
Williamsburg Room 23-2
Farmington Hills

Plan ahead for retirement

To the editor:

I would like to compliment your staff for the excellent article that appeared in the Business section (Nov. 24) entitled, "Retirees need to adjust to changed lifestyle." It accurately states the need to plan for retirement.

However, I would like to point out that since July 1984, Social Security benefits have increased by 27 percent. This is much more than the "occasional" cost-of-living increase the article indicates.

Social Security was designed to

provide a portion of retirement income. Therefore, I would caution individuals who are counting on Social Security to be "the primary source" of retirement income. Social Security will replace a portion of earnings, typically between 34 and 42 percent of the average worker's income.

As district manager of Oakland County's three Social Security offices (Pontiac, Royal Oak and Farmington), I cannot stress enough the value of planning ahead. Every worker has a stake in the Social Security system and should be aware of the benefits available.

Information can be easily obtained by telephone. Operators are available to answer questions between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. by calling 800-345-SSA Monday through Friday. Other days and times, callers can leave a message which will be answered the next working day.

Readers may also request a "Personal Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement" form by calling the above number. This form is then completed and returned to Social Security.

Within four weeks, you will receive a response that provides you with a printout of yearly earnings since 1951.

Robert L. Clevenger,
district manager
Social Security Administration

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