

Opinion

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Changing times Consider autonomous library

"Libraries are not made, they grow."
— British writer Augustine Birrell, 1850-1933

The time seems right to reconsider if the library board should be an autonomous taxing authority.

ALUXURY it isn't. The Farmington Community Library has proven to be a vital community service. Ninety-five percent of this area's residents who use public libraries regularly and exclusively use the Farmington Community Library.

The University of Michigan underscored the Farmington Community Library's community standing by making its vast library resources readily available, by link-up, to the area's business, professional and governmental sectors.

But during peak usage periods on weekends, the Farmington Hills branch operates at or beyond capacity. Noise is up, waiting is longer and seating is limited.

A relentless demand for services has spurred library trustees to consider expanding or replacing the 17-year-old Hills branch.

The time seems right to reconsider if the library board should be an autonomous taxing authority.

In 1979, voters bounced requests for library board autonomy and a 1.5-mill operational levy. But we sense that voters today would have a different view. The city councils of Farmington and Farmington Hills shouldn't be forced to weigh ever-increasing library needs against other budget line items.

BOASTING the highest circulation of any of the 59 member libraries in the Wayne-Oakland Library Federation, the Farmington Community Library indeed has come a long way in its 76-year history.

Books now vie for a patron's eye alongside high-tech services: videocassettes, compact discs, microfiche records, databases and a computerized magazine collection and subject index.

You don't need a library science degree to realize the library — with a \$1.8 million budget, a

44-member staff, a 171,000-volume inventory and an annual circulation of 577,000 materials — works much like a business.

Senate Bill 140, now in the state House, would allow established libraries to become autonomous taxing authorities without a popular vote. But voter approval would be required for an up-to-2-mill operational levy and any capital bond issues.

We believe voters would be more apt to back a library operations tax if they were the ones who said yes to library board autonomy. We also believe any library operations tax should be offset by a proportionate reduction in the city tax rates.

For an autonomous library board to be truly independent, voters must choose the members, not the city councils. Appointments not only could become political payoffs, they also could blur who's accountable to whom.

WE DON'T know which of the library board's options for doubling the size of the 38,000-square-foot Hills branch — an addition, a second building on adjacent land or a new building on a different site — is the most prudent. Cost estimates peg each at \$10 million to \$11 million. (Without autonomy, the library board would have to ask the cities to seek voter approval for a bond issue.)

We do know, however, we can't delay a review of how to govern and finance the Farmington Community Library, serving a population that will exceed 90,000 within 10 years.

With space at a premium and services ever-changing, we sense the community is again ready to scrutinize the merits of an independent library system.

City, suburbs Programs foster understanding

WE KNOW people who've never experienced the joys of early morning at Eastern Market. And it's not fresh corn they're afraid of.

We know some who think the best way to catch a Major League baseball game is by flicking the TV remote. The Tiger Stadium bleachers would be OK, if only the stadium was in some distant suburb.

We know people who when traveling tell out-of-town colleagues they're from (fill-in-the-blank), "that's kind of near — but not really that close — to Detroit."

These are the symptoms of a "deadly" disease, Detroit Paranoia. If it continues to go unchecked, this virus could be responsible for killing off cultural enrichment and diverse friendships for the next generation of suburban adults.

It may already be too late to save the current one.

Many of us who were born and grew up in Detroit's inner ring of suburbs — Redford Township, Southfield, Garden City — have somehow developed a fear of the city in a way our parents couldn't have imagined. Crime and perceptions about crime are a big part of that. So is economic blight. And even though some refuse to admit it, so is racism.

FOR THOSE WHO grew up in or have moved to the second suburban tier — Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield, Troy, Birmingham, etc. — the mistrust seemingly grows in concert with the distance from Detroit's borders.

What's happened is we've let the city's bad characteristics overshadow the good, blotting those out almost entirely.

Our Detroit-born parents don't have this problem. Sure many picked up stakes and moved to the suburbs, fearing deterioration of the city's public schools, crime and declining property values. But pleasant memories of their city neighborhood's childhood hangouts and family outings to city landmarks created equal, positive, impressions.

Detroit Paranoia is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The preferred treatment for the current generation of suburbanites would be to cram as many city experiences into their lives as possible. That's assuming of course that they can be convinced to put their fears aside.

But it's also time to start working on our suburban children, so that the country's sixth-largest city, and all it has to offer, becomes something more than a dark, evil planet for them as they enter adulthood.

Michigan Week, celebrated each May, would be the ideal platform to launch an intensive education effort between Detroit and its suburbs. Students in many communities take part in government programs, sometimes exchanging places with government leaders for a day. Creating student exchanges that cross city-suburban boundaries will help stop Detroit Paranoia from creeping any further.

WE NOTE THAT some communities are off to a good start in this respect. Last week, a second grade class from Gill Elementary School in Farmington Hills made the half-hour bus trip from their school to the Focus/HOPE Center for Children, an infant/toddler day care center in Detroit. The two groups of children drew pictures, sang songs and listened to a storyteller. Together.

This summer, a group of about 40 Detroit-area students will participate in the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights Freedom Tour, a trip through several Southern states that highlights this country's civil rights struggle. The trip will break down the racial barriers that exist between the city and the suburbs," said Bernard Firestone, vice president of the Detroit Metropolitan AFL-CIO and a tour supporter.

Similar student exchange projects have been a common occurrence in Detroit and its suburbs for grade school to high school student during the past couple of years.

We applaud those efforts and we hope to see them expanded.

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We urge suburban government and school leaders to broach this idea with their Detroit counterparts so that such a program can be in place in time for Michigan Week 1990.



Time limits are a must for occupancy permits

EITHER BAN or allow temporary certificates of occupancy.

Don't ban and allow them. To do so blurs what's allowed and what's not. It also spurs questions when a councilman who's also a builder is involved.

Since 1985, a year of heavy construction activity, Farmington Hills has prohibited TCOs to better gain compliance "with construction codes, site plans and landscape plans within a reasonable time frame."

The goal was to give builders "a greater sense of urgency" to finish exterior site work according to a "specific schedule," city manager William Costick said.

Despite the prohibition, the city has continued to issue TCOs, but only when exterior "housekeeping" items remain unfinished.

Final certificates of occupancy aren't issued until all construction, including site work and landscaping, is satisfactorily completed on a new building. Typically, the unfinished work leading to a TCO is completed by the next construction season.

TCOs RETURNED to the spotlight March 27, when council-watcher Luella Hempel brought out that councilman Ben Marks has held a TCO for his new office building



Bob Sklar

across from city hall for two construction seasons.

It doesn't appear that Marks is receiving special treatment, because he's not the only builder to hold a TCO. Besides, it's policy "to always issue a TCO" for all multi-tenant-type office buildings "until all the suites are initially occupied," Costick said.

But lack of a time limit for TCOs has put both Marks and the city in a compromising position.

Marks must complete a 12-point list of non-safety-related items on his building before a final certificate of occupancy will be issued.

His explanation that "sometimes you have to wait for the contractors to come back to do things" is reasonable. And he's not the only builder to hold a TCO longer than one construction season.

Because he's a councilman, I trust he understands the importance of fulfilling his pledge to complete his 12-point list within 60 days.

Still, it bothers me that even though he's a councilman, Marks didn't work to change the perception that TCOs were banned before seeking one himself.

THE CITY manager, meanwhile, had no option but to prepare time lines and other guidelines governing TCOs, given there seems to be legitimate reasons to allow them.

"... Issuance of TCOs will be done so only for good and reasonable cause," reads Costick's new administrative order, approved by the city council Monday.

Such guidelines should have come three years ago, instead of trying to curtail TCO use by implying they were banned.

The apparent contradiction involving TCOs — banning yet allowing them for three years — is another example of a legitimate concern coming to public light only because a taxpayer cared enough to look into it.

I hope the city manager is right when he says: "We've learned from the experience and we'll be better for it."

Bob Sklar is editor of the Farmington Observer.

Farmington readers' forum

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OCC trustees eye new fund

To the editor:

It was reported in several local newspapers that Oakland Community College would be receiving approximately \$2 million for the sale of its property for right-of-way expansion by the city of Auburn Hills and an additional \$5 million from the sale of another parcel to private developers.

Very little mention was made in the press of my proposal at the board of trustees meeting of Feb. 23 to sequester these funds and not allow them to be placed in the general fund or any other previously designated fund.

I feel a fiscal responsibility to the taxpayers of Oakland County to see that these new funds, as well as the anticipated additional potential proceeds of any future property sales, be kept separate and used for two specific purposes.

I believe that the funds should be allocated for unusual capital expenditures required by the college.

I also believe that we should take advantage of this unique opportunity to establish a special scholarship fund to assist needy students in our community in receiving additional help.

In view of our chancellor's prolonged and successful efforts on behalf of the college to secure payment for the sale of the right-of-way, so

strongly resisted by the city of Auburn Hills, I propose that this special scholarship fund be named the R. Steven Nicholson Scholarship Fund.

In addition, the establishment of separate funds will allow taxpayer input in the spending of their money.

Jadith Wiser, trustee,
Oakland Community College

Septic tanks require care

To the editor:

Much of Farmington Hills is still without sanitary sewers. These homes have septic tanks and drainage fields as a means of fluid waste disposal.

Many of these homeowners are not aware that septic tank systems need special attention and maintenance to keep them free of trouble.

It is relatively simple and inexpensive to prevent trouble if you follow a few basic procedures on a regular basis.

The usual problem with these efficient systems is the build-up of solids within the tank and drainage field, which clogs the system and results in waste fluids surfacing instead of seeping into the ground, dissipating and evaporating in a harmless manner.

Septic tanks are not intended as garbage receptacles as from food

ground up in a garbage disposal. This type of waste is often bacteria that builds up in a septic tank.

Garbage should be disposed of by other means. Although a natural bacterial action does occur that effectively dissolves solids in the tank before being passed out into the drain field, it is often not enough.

Some experts advise having the septic tank pumped out every year or two. However, when a tank is pumped, the liquid bacterial system that has built-up as a natural liquifying process, is also pumped out and it has to begin all over again.

There is another and far more simple alternative to keeping a septic tank and drainage field clear.

Most hardware stores sell various brands of harmless bacteria, which are effective agents in keeping solids from being built up and also have the effect of dissolving solids that may already have been built up in the tank or drainage field.

It is usually necessary to flush only one cup of bacteria down the toilet once a month to keep a system clear and trouble free. The cost is minimal and can range from just over \$1 to about \$2 a cup, depending on the brand.

Compare this with the cost of having a septic field repaired or a sanitary sewer system and suddenly the inconvenience of being more careful of what goes in the garbage grinder and flushing a cup of bacteria down the toilet once a month seems relatively minuscule.

Kenneth Kemp,
Farmington Hills

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