

Opinion

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

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Ceremonial Don't change role of mayor

TERRY SEVER hoped to serve an unprecedented two-year term as Farmington Hills mayor because he believes changing mayors every year isn't in the city's best interest.

But he wisely backed off when it came to a vote at the city council's annual reorganization meeting last week. Tradition held, and Mayor Pro Tem Jean Fox was unanimously elected mayor for 1990.

In supporting Fox, Sever acknowledged that, despite his yearning to continue as mayor, "the city is more important than any one individual." We disagree emphatically with Sever's view that the public should elect the mayor to a two-year term. But we commend him for not forcing his hand. Too many more pressing concerns face the city.

THE WISE folks who penned the city charter 16 years ago decided the council should appoint the mayor from among its members.

The charter limits the mayor to 1) presiding at council meetings, and 2) being recognized as head of city government for all ceremonial purposes and for purposes of military law.

It doesn't address the mayor's term. But tradition has dictated one year. That not only gives every council member a chance to be in the spotlight, but also impedes cynicism by limiting the number of nominations to boards and commissions any mayor can make.

His mistaken push for stronger political leadership as mayor aside, Sever has helped lead the way in many key areas: liquor law enforcement, youth recreation, park development, storm drainage improvements.

But he's welcome to pursue his work in each of these areas from his council seat.

Granted, there's no reason the mayor's term can't be open-ended. But there's nothing special about Sever's mayorship that supports breaking tradition.

WE APPRECIATE Sever's candor.

But we oppose any charter amendment to increase the mayor's power.

But we oppose any charter amendment to increase the mayor's power. As we see it, the charter has accomplished what its framers set out to do in mandating a ceremonial mayor and a professional city manager.

The mayor represents Farmington Hills within the scope of authority bestowed by charter. At all other times, the mayor is just another council member. It's not the mayor's job to speak for the council.

Any political posturing to secure government grants should be the product of a seven-headed decision by the city council. That dilutes the chance of political payoffs or under-the-table politicking.

Councilman Ben Marks put it well last summer when he told Sever: "You are the goodwill ambassador. You don't have any political clout. The political clout comes through this council collectively."

SEVER ARGUES the mayor can't crack the Michigan Municipal League's inner circle because Farmington Hills is one of the few cities with a population of 10,000 or more that changes the mayor every year.

Frankly, we don't know why a two-year term would change matters. Besides, governmental relationships built by the city administration are more important.

Ironically, Sever caught the essence of what we believe when he told fellow council members after Fox's election as mayor: "We have to believe in our community and look at what's best for it, because it's certainly better than any one of us left here."

As Shakespeare put it: "What is the city but the people?"

Honest effort Humane Society faces challenge

WERE GETTING out our checkbook for the Michigan Humane Society this holiday season, and we encourage you to do the same — but we need some answers before we'll do so again next year.

It's no secret the Humane Society is in trouble. It's already met with creditors, pleading for time to repay bills.

Nor is it a secret that a former high-ranking Humane Society official is on trial for alleged embezzlement.

What is needed is a clear sign that the society's new management is on the right track in building an honest, open agency that can be trusted with its supporters' contributions. But that takes time.

WHAT WE'VE seen so far, however, has been encouraging. We're impressed the Humane Society seeks to repay all creditors in full, rather than begging them to forgive a portion of the debt.

We've also been impressed with the candor ex-

pressed by Humane Society staff in responding to questions about the crisis. Rather than stonewalling media coverage, they've encouraged it.

For an agency that lives or dies by volunteer contributions, that is a courageous stand to take.

We're aware of how important Humane Society work is in finding homes for stray or unwanted animals, as well as in controlling the animal population.

And we're aware the holiday season is the time most area residents will decide whether to contribute to those activities.

Past Humane Society mismanagement is a real, lingering problem. But withholding payment at this time does nothing to correct the past, only hamper the society's ability to build itself a future.

Contributing to the Michigan Humane Society this holiday season is a leap of faith. But faith, after all, is what the holiday season is all about.

Now, it's up to the Humane Society's new management to prove that faith is not misplaced.

Christmas spat Conflict could be positive

CHRISTMAS is a-comin'... but not to the public schools in our towns if some people have their way.

The issue of Christmas in the classroom (read: religion in the public schools) has the potential to become "an emotional free-for-all," in the words of one area administrator.

It's no secret that, over the past few years, pressure has been applied in some suburban districts by religious minorities to keep the traditional symbols of Christmas out of the public schools.

THOSE WHO favor keeping Christmas (or any other religious holiday) from becoming an official part of public education have a strong argument.

Remember the First Amendment? You know Congress shall make "no law respecting an establishment of religion."

We've said it before, but it bears repeating: Perhaps dismissing the issue as a Constitutional one is too simple an answer.

Perhaps a potentially harmful situation can be defused — and turned into something positive for all concerned.

What we have here is a bad case of culture shock for both sides. Come Christmas in suburban two or more cultures are forced to look each

other squarely in the eye during a season that's supposed to be filled with kindness and joy.

Rather than an "emotional free-for-all," parents and educators should view the issue as an excellent opportunity for working together to teach their children about the various cultures and religions that must coexist on this planet.

THAT'S NOT religious education. That's simply learning about life.

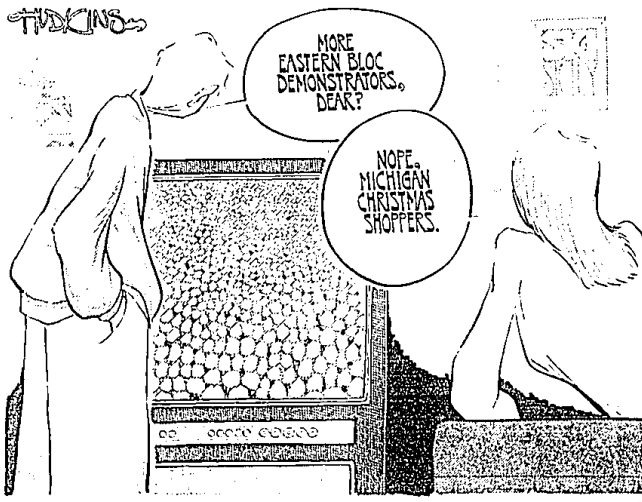
As experienced in the ways of the world as we think we are, few of us really have a very good understanding of each others' cultural values or why we feel the way we do.

And, unfortunately, some of us tend to pass on this lack of knowledge and misunderstanding to our children. The whole thing in this December Dilemma issue is that both sides have to understand.

The Christians — and most of our communities are overwhelmingly Christian — have to understand why the religious minorities feel the way they do about Christmas in the classroom.

And the religious minorities have to understand why the others are finally fighting back after years of silence on the issue.

Just understand why people feel the way they do. That's not too much to ask this holiday season. Is it?



Mike Flanagan merits job of superintendent

HE MAY not be the most qualified, based solely on credentials. But he's the best person for the job.

I agree with Farmington school board president Helen Prutow. Farmington Public Schools' national search should be ended and acting Superintendent Mike Flanagan should be named the chief day-to-day administrator.

He's a proven leader, just the kind the district needs.

Named our first deputy superintendent in 1986, Flanagan, 40, has worked tirelessly to keep his finger on the district's pulse.

Since moving up in June when Graham Lewis abruptly resigned as superintendent, Flanagan hasn't been a mere caretaker. Color him a problem solver and morale builder with a vision for the future.

HIS ABILITY to listen, evaluate and communicate was underscored this summer amid collective bargaining, repairs to Farmington High, planning for the new westside elementary and replacing the bus garage's leaking underground fuel tanks.

So let's drop the formalities, promote Flanagan to the top job and get on with the real business at hand — educating our kids.



Bob Sklar

A chalkboard full of challenges await the new school chief, regardless of whether it's Flanagan.

Remember, we're talking about a district with a \$45 million budget, 11,000 students and 1,400 regular employees — and growing.

The challenges range from opening the first new elementary school in 20 years to taking the district to the cutting edge of computer technology to bringing the curriculum in tune with the '90s to improving the graduation rate to upgrading older buildings to battling substance abuse among teenagers.

A **TRUSTED** money manager, Flanagan, formerly assistant business manager, returned to Farmington in 1985 as assistant superintendent for finance after a stint in Huron Valley Schools. He hears what taxpayers are saying.

He doesn't have a doctorate. Nor does he have classroom experience. But neither shortfall seems reason

enough to stonewall Prutow's recommendation.

District attorney J. Kingstey Cotton is researching whether a superintendent without classroom experience would jeopardize the district's North Central Association of Secondary Schools accreditation.

But it's unlikely it would, considering the district has prospered under Flanagan's stewardship.

He knows what excellent instruction for all students means. He's committed to not only increasing student learning skills but also parental involvement. And he has a knack for explaining dry "educational" in lively, simple terms.

BEYOND THAT, Flanagan understands the importance of apprising the school board of a curriculum change before it's in effect.

He understands the importance of providing a capsule overview before calling on his assistants in agenda item discussions.

He understands that a superintendent not only sets the tone for a district but also is its goodwill ambassador.

Mike Flanagan deserves to have "acting" dropped from his latest title.

Bob Sklar is editor of the Farmington Observer.

Farmington readers' forum

Letters must be signed, original copies and include the address and telephone number of the writer. Names will be withheld from publication only for sufficient reason. We reserve the right to edit them. Send letters to Readers' Forum, Farmington Observer, 33203 Grand River Ave., Farmington 48024.

Scouts thank food donors

To the editor:

We would like to thank the following neighborhoods for their generous support of the Boy Scouts National Good Turn Scouting For Food on Nov. 18:

- Farmington Meadows subdivision, Farmington Oaks subdivision and Farmington Square subdivision.
- Streets — Stocum, Warner, Hayden, Frederick, Manning, Mayfield, Maple, Cloverdale, Orchard Lake Road south of the freeway.

We appreciate your efforts with this project to help feed the hungry during the holiday season.

Cub Scout Pack 162,
American Legion Post 346,
Farmington

Staff efforts earn thanks

To the editor:

I want to extend my appreciation to you and your staff for the excellent coverage provided to the community of our recent city council election.

I believe that the Observer played a major role in increasing voter awareness, which, combined with

other forces, resulted in a dramatic increase to our voter turnout.

You can certainly feel as though you have performed a community service through the extensive coverage of the candidates and the issues that you presented over the course of the past several months.

I applaud you and your staff for your continued dedication to journalism.

Jonathan L. Grant,
Farmington Hills

Greed mars library vote?

To the editor:

Regarding the failure of the library proposals in the Nov. 7 election, I'll say the cities weren't supportive.

I called to ask about the far-west site and was told that the city of Farmington Hills would not allow the library to take any more central parcels zoned commercial off the tax rolls. They would only allow their own library to have land zoned residential.

As a Farmington resident, I have no control over the development of happy officials in the Hills. But if site was a factor in the bond issue defeat, the blame lies largely with their greed.

Mary Power,
Farmington

Democracy was at work

To the editor:

Civic government in Farmington Hills enjoyed one of its finer moments when, for over five hours, officials and concerned and dedicated citizens thrashed out a Code of Ethics, which will guide our city on its journey to the year 2000 and beyond.

Led by Mayor Terry Sever, who chaired the meeting with a firm but fair hand, City Manager Bill Costick, councilman Vagnozzi and Lichtman, with ex-officio Arnold, rounded out the official family.

Facing them were Lucella Hempel, Masha Silver, Rosa Plum, Dave Howlett and John Murphy, who persevered diligently to help construct a document that represents the finest contributions of both the community and its elected and appointed officials, including onlooker councilman Ben Marks.

After a brief meeting, which is scheduled for 5 p.m. Monday, Dec. 4, when the committee of the whole will polish up a few remaining details, the code will be presented to the council, where its adoption seems assured.

This writer is both proud and privileged to have been part of this dramatic democratic process.

Albert Rosen,
Farmington Hills

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