

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48024 Robert Sklar editor/477-5450

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Right move Council wisely zapped panel

"You must forge ahead as a limited team, not as individual superstars."
— Former councilman Phil Arnold, addressing the Farmington Hills City Council

ALL SEVEN Farmington Hills City Council members finally heeded the people's plea. The full council wisely voted Feb. 19 to dissolve its beleaguered ad hoc facilities committee. Previously, only Mayor Jean Fox and Mayor Pro Tem Aldo Vagnozzi had opposed the study group.

Given the perception it was formed to skirt the Open Meetings Act, the three-member panel had no chance to succeed, no matter how hard it worked.

As we wrote Feb. 15, we appreciated committee member Jon Grant's belief that unanimity wasn't a given among members and his assurance that they had no secret agenda.

But the fear was that planning options for six of the top issues facing the city could be massaged by a committee of three. That key fourth council vote could be waiting in the wings.

Grant and councilmen Terry Sever and Larry Lichtman were charged with gathering facts about 1) library expansion needs, 2) parkland acquisition, 3) the parks and recreation millage, 4) a community/senior activities center, 5) Year 2000 steering committee recommendations, and 6) creative funding options.

Only a committee of the whole should study such a sweeping, expensive mission involving the city's most pressing facility needs!

Why form a committee to study precisely what the full council should be dedicating itself to?

much to blame for that as anyone. Why form a committee to study precisely what the full council should be dedicating itself to?

GRANT SAYS long-term financial planning can't be accomplished within the framework of regular council meetings.

Then slate finance study sessions the first Monday of the month, when the council doesn't ordinarily meet, and shorter study discussions before the third regular council meeting of the month.

Meanwhile, we're still concerned about the thrust of the committee's charge.

The Farmington Community Library Board of Trustees oversees the two-branch library and is in the midst of studying expansion needs. Why duplicate that effort?

We don't object to the council delving into parks and rec issues. But why doesn't it meet more regularly with the parks and recreation commission rather than undertaking its own land and funding study?

A detailed 1989 report on senior activity needs is gathering dust. Let's not re-trace the steps of that report's authors.

The Year 2000 steering committee has yet to set priorities and explore funding for its newly unveiled recommendations. So it's a bit premature for the council to address them.

AS WE see it, the committee of the whole should limit itself to coordinating facility needs — looking for shared space and combined funding options.

As for long-term financial planning, we trust that becomes an integral part of the council's budgeting process. Big-picture projections for the next 3-5 years, as former councilman Phil Arnold suggests, should be demanded of the city administration.

Year 2000 steering committee member Marty Krohner captured the spirit of the people when he told the city council: "You're not up there as omnipotent powers. You represent us because we, as voters, elected you to represent us — to hear our words."

That sage advice should permeate the committee of the whole's first meeting March 13.

Mediation

Good tool for solving problems

CAN WE GO BACK to the good old days when a dispute between neighbors was settled in the village barber shop?

Probably not, but even many attorneys will agree that we have become an overly litigious society. Somehow the words "I'll sue you" have become more common than "Let's sit down and work things out."

So as legal fees and court dockets swell, several Wayne County organizations and a brand new center in Oakland County are allowing a return to old ways by offering to help people settle their own disputes.

It's called mediation. And it's a negotiation process where:

- Two or more people involved in a dispute volunteer to sit down together in private with a neutral, trained person (a mediator).
- The mediator, who is generally a volunteer, does not judge who is right or wrong. He assists them in working out a solution to their problem.
- All parties involved in the dispute explain the problems situation as they see it and present their ideas for how they think the matter can be resolved.
- It's the responsibility of the disputing parties to develop and mutually agree upon a realistic workable solution.
- That solution is not legally binding.

IT'S AN appealing, low-cost process for settling the kinds of disputes that can arise between landlords and tenants, consumers and merchants, or next-door neighbors.

It has the backing of the state of Michigan, which established in 1988 a Community Dispute Resolution Program, adding a \$2 state fee to all lawsuits to help finance it.

And the agencies involved say that mediation in many of these kinds of cases produces faster, more satisfying results, while freeing up judges to deal with more serious problems.

In Oakland County, the new Dispute Resolution Clearinghouse and Settlement Center, Inc. will officially open its doors later this month in a storefront in a Bloomfield Township shopping center. It already has helped settle its first case and has two on tap.

In Wayne County, the Detroit Neighborhood

Reconciliation Center, had a 90 percent success rate after three months. After a year, 85 percent of those agreements are still working, officials there report.

The Wayne County mediation agencies have so far concentrated on Detroit, so that residents of the western suburbs which we cover have no such recourse.

And comments from judges and attorneys from those western Wayne suburbs aren't exactly encouraging.

That seems too bad.

BECAUSE IT WAS the Oakland County Bar Association which proposed the idea for the new mediation center there. And it has the unanimous approval of the Oakland County District Judges Association.

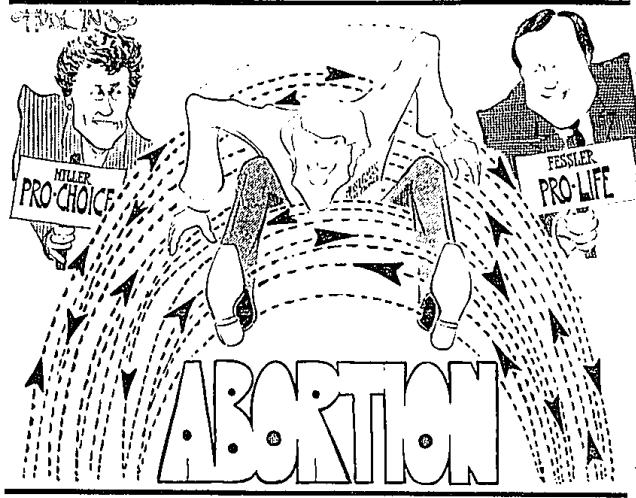
That kind of support is needed, so attorneys aren't out there bemoaning that cases are being taken away from them and so district courts will make mediation information available and refer cases.

Molly Forward, executive director of the non-profit Oakland County Center, said those who have the least enthusiasm for it may be moved by statistics. "We need to establish a successful track record," she said. "Sometimes it's hard when you are used to making decisions for other people. Sitting on the bench becomes a way of life."

The key, of course, is the training and expertise of the volunteer mediators. And that's a whole other dimension of the mediation concept — giving people a chance to volunteer their time for the community and learn a new skill at the same time.

Most programs require 40 hours of training. Steve Eagle, an Auburn Hills patrolman and a volunteer mediator in the new Oakland County program, said "... it was one of the best training classes I've ever had. It taught you skills you can use in life."

The mediation center — giving volunteers a chance to learn and apply important skills in conflict resolution and offering residents a chance to come up with their own solutions to disputes — is a step in the right direction for our communities.



Forecast rightly gives nature a leading role

IT'S NO surprise beautification and environmental preservation command such a prominent role in the Farmington Hills Year 2000 Forecast.

They comprise the theme of the five-page opening report in the 60-page forecast. And they represent two of the city's top challenges for the '90s.

The forecast, the product of a year of hard work by 150 community volunteers, provides a blueprint for the kind of city that residents desire by the next century.

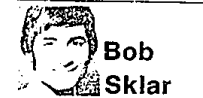
The beautification and environmental preservation task force, led by chair Leslie Masek, summarized its work in a series of goals that include a visual master plan to create a unified visual effect on Farmington Hills visitors and residents.

Other goals include a clean, healthy, attractive environment; environmental and beautification standards; an environmentally and historically aware public; and emphasis on preserving nature and history.

Worthy goals all.

I ESPECIALLY like the idea of seeking private support for mini parks — for example, urging businesses with large expanses of green along major roads like 12 Mile to donate small parcels at the right of way.

Many businesses already have shown a penchant for beautification and the environment through award-winning landscape designs. Some



Bob Sklar

have even adopted stretches of free-way to beauty.

To promote Mother Nature, the forecast suggests establishing a city bird, tree and flower.

I'm not big on municipal symbols. They tend to be corny. But if chosen with care and used sparingly, they not only could boost Farmington Hills' community spirit, but also provide ecological insight into its environment.

THE TASK force calls for a community green at the city hall complex. The city square would boast a carillon tower, greenery, sculptures, benches, fountains and walkways — including a pond, but I'm leery of the cost and funding.

A more immediate need is a master landscape plan for the city to, among other things, green up the sea of asphalt in many parking lots around town.

Other task force suggestions worth spotlighting include:

- Beautifying the Orchard Lake Road business corridor.
- Making community service a high school graduation requirement.
- Mounting an anti-litter campaign via stricter law enforcement.

- Promoting environmental awareness both at home and school.
- Requiring community work as part of district court sentences.
- Promoting redevelopment of blighted areas through tax incentives and grants, and sponsorship of a clean-up, paint-up, fix-up week in spring and fall.
- Starting curbside recycling of solid waste materials.
- Stiffening penalties for violators of tree protection and wetlands laws.
- Providing tax incentives for using alternate energy sources and restoring historic buildings.
- Demanding an adequate bond from and tougher occupancy requirements for developers to protect natural resources during site improvements.
- Improving traffic flow with coordinated timing of lights and traffic-signalizing lights.

TWO OF the best suggestions are related: finish installing sidewalks along all major roads and initiating a citywide bike path network.

Beautification and environmental preservation can only succeed when we cut our reliance on the car.

That would reduce traffic, noise, pollution and energy depletion and promote exercise, the outdoors, our cityscape and a sense of community.

I trust city leaders won't let the forecast, printed at a cost of \$32,000, gather dust.

Bob Sklar is editor of the Farmington Observer.

Farmington readers' forum

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Accredit all our schools

To the editor:

I was pleased to read the Feb. 19 article regarding the impending North Central accreditation of Larkshire Elementary School.

Mr. Lanigan, his faculty and the Larkshire families deserve community recognition for initiating accreditation of our school district's elementary schools.

Despite crowded conditions, Larkshire has made consistent, year-to-year gains in student achievement as measured by MEAP testing, in an exceptionally well-maintained facility and is characterized by both the high degree of professionalism of its faculty and its very constructive parent involvement.

Building on the experience at Larkshire, the district should seriously consider expanding accreditation to all of our elementary and middle schools.

State of Michigan and North Central "Outcome Accreditation," or "O.A.," should not be dismissed as superfluous kudos for the school district.

Accreditation is a proven format

Road beauty is inspiring

To the editor:

A short part of Halsted Road and of 13 Mile are designated "Natural Beauty" roads. This is a wonderful idea.

They are tranquil sections of otherwise very busy roads. I enjoy driving on them at all times of the year.

That is, except when others are speeding on these roads — and, way over the speed limit.

I often wish I could put up a huge sign so people would pay attention and follow the speed limit that is posted.

Of course, I do not wish to destroy the beauty of the road.

That is why I am offering this small poem instead.

Natural Beauty Road
They rush, they hurry, they speed
This sign they do not heed
Slow down, relax, enjoy a mile
Tall trees and beauty . . . a little while.

Richard I. DeVries,
Farmington Hills

Elaine Simpson,
Farmington Hills

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