

Opinion

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GA/P

O&E Monday, May 7, 1990

School budget It demands public scrutiny

FOR TAXPAYERS in Farmington and Farmington Hills, more than 60 percent of every tax dollar goes to the Farmington Public Schools.

Residents whose houses have a market value of \$100,000, for example, pay about \$1,665 in Farmington school taxes.

Enough said about why all taxpayers — regardless of whether they have school-age kids — should give a hoot about the financial state of the 11,000-student district.

With a tax base of \$2 billion, the district belongs to everyone and is everyone's concern — make no mistake about that.

Now's the time to peruse Superintendent Mike Flanagan's 1990-91 budget proposal of \$92 million — up \$3 million from this school year's amended operating budget.

The proposed operating tax rate of 32.05 mills reflects a .34 mill drop, thanks to the Headlee Tax Limitation Amendment. In an era of skyrocketing property assessments, Flanagan isn't asking for a Headlee override — and wisely so.

MAY 22 is the time to hoist red flags about the 100-page budget proposal. That's when the school board will, in effect, establish the new operating budget and set the new tax rate.

Two questions that beg to be asked: "How do we document how effectively each dollar is used to educate our kids? Can we reduce costs through economies of scale or tighter spending controls without negatively affecting instruction?"

Upwards of 80 percent of the budget covers labor costs. Despite the introduction of high technology in the classroom, teaching remains labor intensive.

Flanagan proposes hiring 19 new teachers to meet enrollment growth. His proposal also includes startup costs for the new westside elementary school and a 10-percent contingency fund for emergencies.

The school chief also is calling for five new positions: a media specialist, two elementary guidance counselors, a principal intern and a police liaison officer — at an approximate cost of \$240,000. The schools will pay half the cost of the liaison officer.

THE GUIDANCE counselors and the liaison officer are higher priorities, as we see it. Societal pressures — from substance abuse to one-parent families — are too complex for classroom teachers to control.

Good arguments can be made for a new media specialist, a principal intern, even another print shop specialist.

But we wonder: Are any of these positions more important than adding classroom teachers to reduce class sizes? Maybe so, maybe not. We urge feedback May 22, when it counts the most.

We also encourage debate on Flanagan's bid to ticket \$5.5 million for a potpourri of anticipated needs: facility improvements to equalize learning opportunities, state school tax reform, Social Security payment cuts, noncomputer equipment, gifted education study and facility study recommendations.

LIKE TRUSTEE Janice Rolnick, we're concerned about the slow pace in upgrading the elementary science curriculum. We're tired of hearing it's being studied. We're ready for action.

Like trustee James Abernethy, we're concerned about no increase in the grounds maintenance outlay, especially in light of the district's commitment to improved landscaping. Why improve greenery without trying harder to keep it looking nice?

Another idea was to increase postage for district mailings. Frankly, we'd rather see the district invest in cabling school board meetings.

We'd like more of the budget — upwards of 55 percent, as one school board candidate suggests — earmarked for instruction, adjusting for center special ed programs. That percentage assumes some support services are actually instructional and vice versa.

We sense Flanagan understands the legitimacy of that goal. We trust he tries earnestly to achieve it.

Got a beef about fat in the school district budget? Consider it out of whack with student needs or taxpayer limits?

Then show up at 7:15 p.m. Tuesday, May 22 at Warner Middle School. Don't expect a sympathetic ear later if you surrender your right to speak up now.

Criteria are lacking in board nominees

"THAT RECALL is the stupidest thing I ever heard of," said John Richardson, DVM, who enjoys talking politics almost as much as he enjoys seeing my elkhound in his Farmington clinic.

A vocal and loyal Michigan State University alumnus, he was talking about the virtually impossible job of recalling three MSU trustees. I've written about this before, and John faithfully reads my stuff.

Those trustees helped make George Perles athletic director over the objections of President John D. Blaggo. In so doing, they admitted holding several closed meetings in violation of the Open Meetings Act, for which they are being sued.

My column pitted the recall campaign as futile and suggested people look to the political process to replace bad trustees with good ones. After all, MSU trustees are nominated at state political conventions and elected by the voters.

RICHARDSON HAD delightful news. He and other MSU alumni are working in a Green and White Political Action Committee on exactly such a project.

"We're a mixture of Democrats, Republicans and Independents," said Richardson, who, as a former mayor, has some political savvy. "Talk to Kevin Kelly; he's executive director of the Michigan Medical Society."

Kelly chairs the Green and White PAC, which has set a goal of raising \$15,000 this year. Anyone interested in running for the MSU board at either party convention may contact him for a list of criteria. Active candidates may send their resumes, be interviewed and perhaps be endorsed.

"We want to give them some good options," Kelly said. Democrats will nominate their ticket Aug. 19 in Flint; Republicans, Sept. 7 in Detroit.

If Green and White PAC endorses aren't nominated, Kelly said, the board will look over successful nominees to see if any merit endorsement. "It might be all four; it might be one or two or three," he said.

THE GROUP has sensible criteria. Those it supports must be MSU alumni or demonstrate strong interest in the nation's first land-grant university. It helps if they've worked in volunteer programs for MSU.

They must know organization



Tim Richard

management and fiscal issues, be team players, understand the legislative and budget processes and seek only the best for MSU.

There are no partisan litmus test questions. "Our goal is trustee excellence," Kelly said.

The Green and White PAC, to our knowledge, is the first university group of its kind in Michigan. "It was organized in 1987 but was dormant for about 1½ years," he said. Interest in it spread like wildfire when the rotten news about the Perles flap and the athletic program pushed news about MSU's educational programs out of the papers and off the airwaves.

THE PROCESS by which political parties nominate candidates for the MSU board, the State Board of Education and the boards of the University of Michigan and Wayne State is

amazingly casual.

Democrats pick four men and four women. Interest groups rather than abilities are emphasized — blacks, Hispanics, Jews, the Upper Peninsula, the Michigan Education Association and, of course, "The Union" — the United Auto Workers.

Republicans casually pick nice gentlemen and ladies but use no solid criteria.

Yes, some good people get into office, but it's despite the political process, not because of it. The Green and White PAC can only help improve things.

You MSU zealots will be getting mail from the Green and White PAC soon. Kevin Kelly's telephone number is 517-337-1351.

Meanwhile, you can guarantee the process will be improved by running for Democratic or Republican precinct delegate. That will give you a direct hand in party nominations. See your county clerk by May 8 for a petition.

Tim Richard directs the Suburban Communications Corp. News Service. SCC is the parent company of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

from our readers

Hey, folks, clear walks

To the editor:

According to the Observer editorial on sidewalk snow removal (April 26), if residents object to doing their job as the law requires, then government should do it for them.

Don't require government to enforce the law. Don't try to change the law to accommodate the change. Just buy a couple of tractors and hire seasonal help. Fortunately, the public, often led by taxpayers, has seen the folly — and cost — of expanding government's responsibilities with this and that and never an end.

The fact is that, thus far, after 3-4 years, sidewalks in Farmington Hills are seasonal only but without signs, "Closed for the Winter."

With the exception of 1-2 residents

on 13 Mile who apparently remember their roots in other communities, public walks are never passable, except at pedestrian risk, after a winter storm. Nor do churches or a condominium complex clean public sidewalks. But all parties keep their private parking lots and driveways clean.

If this city is to have more sidewalks, a desirable addition, the issue of maintenance must now be confronted and resolved. Responsibility is clear under the present charter.

Enforce the law when and where necessary, whether or not the homeowner has gone to Florida or is a retiree.

Then no one who wants to use the walks during the winter will have to go to Farmington city or Birmingham or any other nearby community. Sidewalks will be available right here for school children, joggers and walkers, including retirees.

Lawrence Niblett, Farmington Hills

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