

Opinion

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Tom Baer editor/477-5450

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Speak up!

Debate on millage needed

THERE'S A BATTLE brewing on the school millage front. Turn up the volume, please. Let's not have one of those whispering campaigns.

The Farmington school community needs debate and lots of it, many questions asked and answered, before it came make an informed decision on the important millage increase request.

Debate, however, seems unlikely, even though lots of folks are taking sides on the issue.

In case anyone's missed it, the Farmington School District has a two-proposal request for voters to decide in a Feb. 5 special election. An increase of 2.7 mills is being asked for operations and another 1 mill for capital projects.

It's a complicated (some would say convoluted) proposition. Passage of the second proposal is contingent on the first being approved.

Apparently, there's a lot of people need to know before Feb. 5. So why aren't they getting that knowledge through normal political debate?

WELL, YOU CAN'T blame resident Richard DeVries for the lack of desire to communicate on the issue. The Ford Motor Co. engineer, who is involved with something called Citizens For Quality Schools, an anti-millage group, organized a debate for Tuesday and even reserved cable TV time.

But he found no takers, no one to argue the other side. . . not the superintendent of schools, not the school trustees and unfortunately not Carol Luckscheiter co-chair of the pro-millage Friends of Farmington Schools.

Said DeVries: "To do this properly, it (the debate) should be done before the first of the year, so it can be re-broadcast (on cable TV) a couple of times before the election."

"A little public debate might get them (school officials) to look at their budget and make better use of the money they already have."

Pay raises

Put them on hold for now

THE PEOPLE OF MICHIGAN should ask state officials to put aside their proposed raises, in some cases amounting to 16.2 percent, until they earn them.

Last week a state commission recommended giving raises to legislators, the seven Supreme Court justices, the governor and the lieutenant governor. These raises, which would take effect Oct. 1, 1991, were approved by the commission despite a recent simultaneous mandate to cut \$500 million from Michigan's budget through state services, programs and layoffs.

The impropriety of accepting raises under such circumstances should be reason enough to cancel them. But there are other compelling reasons:

● Burton Schwartz of Farmington Hills, who chaired the committee recommending the raises, said the pay increases are necessary to attract individuals qualified to solve Michigan's problems.

That argument, "if you pay them more, they must be (or will turn out to be) better," is flawed. One need look only as far as the national level in the public sector to find well-paid, well-intentioned budget-cutters and managers presiding over a recession-driven economy, an unfavorably lopsided trade imbalance and monetary and social malaise from coast to coast.

IN THE PRIVATE sector, heads of companies have salaries that effortlessly outdistance the annual pay of President George Bush. Yet those chairmen, chairwomen and CEOs are watching

Christmas front

Reason, tolerance prevail

NO NEWS IS good news, we feel, when it comes to the so-called December Dilemma — this Christmas-in-the-schools controversy that has nettled some suburbanites in past years.

Christmas in the classroom (or religion in the public schools) is some of our overwhelmingly Christian communities had the potential to become "an emotional free-for-all" in the words of an administrator, once the religious minorities got going on the subject.

It's no secret that pressure has been applied to the school establishments of several districts (Rochester and Birmingham come to mind) by these minorities to keep the traditional symbols of Christmas out of the public schools. And of course parents to whom Christmas means a lot were talking back.

This December, however, all is quiet on the Christmas front, or that's the way it seems.

Why have things settled down? We'd like to believe that it's a matter of points well made and

Maybe we can understand the school chief and the board members winking out of a debate, but not the Friends of the Farmington Schools. Isn't that what such a group is for?

Said Luckscheiter: "None of us has chosen to debate. I personally don't like to debate. It's not something I'd enjoy doing."

SO THE VOTERS stay in the dark with the days falling away before the Feb. 5 election.

We're not saying this is the case in the Farmington District, but many school people feel the way to pass a millage is . . . very quietly. Just make sure the "YES" people make it to the polls, the thinking goes. If the "NO" voters stay home and watch TV sitcom reruns on election day, that's just fine.

That may work in some elections in some communities, but not in Farmington, we think.

For one thing, we have this bastion of conservatism and fiscal responsibility known as the Alexander Hamilton Life Insurance Co. Richard Headlee, prop., bang in the middle of our community.

Headlee and his tight-fisted crew have been heard from before in local school elections. An 11th-hour appeal by Headlee had a lot to do with the mixing of a \$27 million bond issue in 1988.

When Richard Headlee speaks, people of the Farmington area listen.

There is every indication that Alexander Hamilton intends to get involved in the current request for additional money. A Hamilton "economist" has said that the school district needs to pare spending even further before it asks taxpayers for more.

No, if the pro-millage people want voters to buy their request for more money for the schools, then they are going to have to get out and sell it. So let the debate begin.

their market share dwindle to foreign competitors. They're also taking the advice of high-paid consultants who recommend going for the short-term bang of big profits, instead of the long-term benefits of seeing programs (such as solar energy and production of higher density computer chips) through to completion, which would keep jobs here, guarantee a lock on research and development and still return a handsome profit.

So paying someone more isn't necessarily the answer.

● This is Michigan. A salary of \$45,450, which legislators now receive, may not be much to live on in New York or California, but it provides a very nice living in this state. If that isn't enough for a legislator's family to live on, perhaps the legislator should ask his or her spouse to get a job, like the rest of us.

That said, it is necessary to attract good people to serve in the public sector and money is an incentive. There is nothing wrong with giving these people a raise under the same circumstances the rest of us get a pay increase — merit and performance.

Look in any direction and one sees areas on a statewide level that can be improved — education, incentives for small businesses, commerce, social services, overcrowded prisons and court dockets, medical care, housing, roads. Measurable improvement in these areas would make Michigan a better place to live for its residents, who come first, since they pay the bills.

Legislators are sworn to serve those residents. Do your part, and we'll do our part.

well taken on both sides of the issue.

CHRISTMAS IS to be downplayed in some districts, according to new holiday policies. There seems to be a new attitude, as well, as people adjust to the new policies.

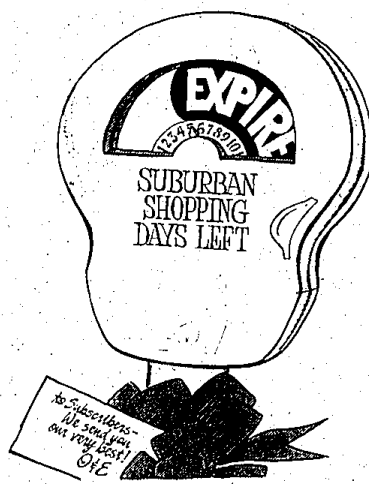
"I guess people are getting educated to the fact and sensitive to the fact that this is no longer a 100 percent Christian community," said a Christian pastor from Birmingham in an interview.

In the past, we've asked for tolerance and understanding on this issue. It could be made into a positive experience for all concerned with the proper understanding.

Rather than the emotional, free-for-all, parents and educators should take the issue as an opportunity for a new, together, to teach their children about the various cultures and religions that must co-exist in this place.

That's not religious education, that's simply learning about life.

THINKING



The cost of housing turns 'dream' into a nightmare

THIS COLUMN is another in a series devoted to exploring what has happened to The American Dream here in Michigan.

Last week I showed that the dreams of most middle-class people are now being shredded by real declining incomes. This week, I'll start looking at the costs of some of the things that traditionally have meant participation in The American Dream.

Take housing. After all, owning your own home is one mark of entry into the middle class. And traditionally, more Michigan people owned their homes than anywhere else because they held the good, high-paying jobs in the auto industry.

BUT STARTING around the mid-1970s (just about the same time that real incomes started to fall), something started going haywire with the costs of housing.

On average, the price of a house tripled from 1973 to 1988. And the steep rise in interest rates — remember the "standard" mortgage used to be 30 years at 5 percent — compounded the problem of making house payments.

In the 1950s, a typical Michigan 30-year-old middle-class man in an ordinary house spent on average 14 percent of his gross income on mortgage payments. By 1973 that had risen to 21 percent. And by 1983 it had shot up to 44 percent.

When mortgage payments consume nearly half of an average guy's income, it's not at all surprising that the rates of home ownership have started slipping for the first time in nearly 70 years.

The consequences of the terrific inflation in housing costs over the last 20 years are many and terrible.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

The Builders Association of Southeastern Michigan says:

● Local building codes are inconsistent and too restrictive, while building inspectors are arbitrary and slow. This runs up costs and drags out construction time and interest costs to the builder.

● Housing construction is energy intensive, and when the price of energy goes up, so do the costs of housing.

● People have been indoctrinated to want more house than in the past. There are all sorts of examples showing that a family with an average income simply cannot afford an average house.

Realtors used to say that a sensible budget for housing was 25 percent of the husband's income. Today they say you should budget 40 percent of a family's combined income.

THE CONSEQUENCES of the terrific inflation in housing costs over the last 20 years are many and terrible.

They start with the thousands of homeless people you see sleeping in the park and trying to get a square meal in a church feeding program. Some are mentally ill; others are ha-

bitual substance abusers.

But far too many are perfectly ordinary, decent, hard-working people who simply cannot earn enough money to afford housing for their families. For them, The American Dream ended some time ago, and their nightmare is our shame.

But far more common and far more insidious is the kind of pressure making enough money to meet the house payments puts on families. Husbands work at two jobs instead of one. Mothers go back to work six weeks after delivering a baby, not because they want to, but because they have to.

One of the important parts of The American Dream was set out in one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms: the Freedom from Fear. Far too many families are living right at the brink, existing from paycheck to paycheck, always in fear that some unforeseen event — a layoff, a pregnancy, an illness covered by insurance — could put them out in the street. For them, The American Dream exists only in the fantasy world of TV ads.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His award-winning column will appear periodically.

Philip Power

from our readers

Compare our schools to many others

To the editor:

With your paper indicating that the coming request for a millage increase will spark quite a debate, I offer this suggestion.

I believe it would be most helpful to the voters if they knew how their schools are doing. I therefore suggest that your paper make a comparison of how our high schools compare with others in our area. How do they compare with Cranbrook, Brother Rice, Marian and Mercy?

This comparison should include: Hours spent in classroom work, homework hours, student test performances and SAT college entrance exams, percentage of students in need of remedial assistance at college or university level, percentage of students going on to a higher education college or university, percent of students graduating from high school, percent of students graduating from college or university, percent of students who merit scholarship awards.

Also: number of hours in high

school spent on science, math, language courses, average cost per pupil for four years of high school, average compensation cost per teacher and principal, average fringe benefit cost state/school district per teacher/principal, average number of clerical/administrative personnel per pupil, condition of schools, maintenance cost per pupil, teacher/student contacts after hours and average class size.

This should be a thorough analysis and comparison. It would be a great service performed by your paper. The voters need this to determine if they are getting adequate value for their tax dollars.

Ernest J. Onisko,
Farmington Hills

Shooting dog was wrong

To the editor:

I read your article in today's Observer headlined "Dog Owner Is Incensed Over Pet's Shooting." I also heard the story on WXYZ radio.

Evidently several children witnessed the shooting. I am concerned that this trigger-happy cop will con-

front a family argument or citizen traffic problem in the same manner as he treated the family dog.

The problem is that this person is still out there, making excuses for his stupid and unprofessional behavior. Furthermore, the Farmington Hills Police Department will back him for a senseless killing. As a resident of Farmington Hills, I deplore his behavior.

Jim E. Mills,
Farmington Hills

Opinions are to be shared

Opinions and ideas are best when shared with others.

That's why the Farmington Observer encourages its readers to share their views with others in the From Our Readers column.

Letters should be mailed to the editor, The Farmington Observer, 21898 Farmington Road, Farmington 48336.

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