

# Farmington council veteran expects tough race

**Editor's note:** Five candidates — including three incumbents and two challengers — will vie for three seats on the Farmington City Council on Tuesday, Nov. 5. Today we focus on incumbent Ralph Yoder.

**By Casey Hane**  
staff writer

This could be one of the toughest races of his career.

Twenty-six-year Farmington City Council veteran Ralph Yoder said he sees candidates working harder than ever this year, five people vie for three open seats. But despite challenges to the status quo, he believes there's no substitute for his years of civic service.

"I just think experience has got something to say for itself," said Yoder, who has been re-elected seven times since his first win in 1965 and is the most senior council member.

And, obviously, he disagrees with

one challenger who calls for restriction of council terms.

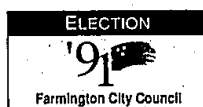
"I have no problem with it (staying in office), as long as the electorate wants to put you back in," said the 65-year-old former resident of the Bel Aire subdivision who recently moved to River Glen Condominiums on Grand River.

He has stayed on the council because of the "camaraderie" and the chance to serve his neighbors.

"I consider myself as somewhat of a stabilizing influence on the council," he said. "And, because of my longevity, I believe... I view issues from a different perspective."

YODER CAN often be found playing the devil's advocate at a Monday night council meeting, and prides himself on considering each issue individually.

Yoder first became active in city government when a friend was elected to the city council in 1957 and he began attending meetings. Eight years later, he decided, "I thought I'd kind of like to try that."



He won his first two-year term in 1965 and after that won consecutive four-year terms by garnering more votes.

Yoder's sometimes spotty attendance at meetings is an issue he addresses directly. While president of Tri-Country Enterprises, Inc., a trucking firm, Yoder missed three or four meetings in a row while up north on business and another couple of meetings while on vacation.

He is now retired, and said he plans to spend much more time in town and on council duties.

The largest issue facing the city in the immediate future is the financial effect of state and federal budget cuts, the looming prospect of property tax reform, and the bad economy



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which is all hitting the city at the same time. "We're dipping into our reserves already," he said. "We will be good this year and next year, but we could be in trouble if the economy doesn't bounce back."

**OTHER NEW ISSUES** have lined up this year's race, including temporary business signs and the question of whether the city's recycling fee is a tax, Yoder said. He believes the current sign ordinance is

too restrictive, but backs the city's position on the recycling fee decision. He is willing to reconsider putting the fee on the tax roll in another year, if more people are using the curbside recycling program.

Yoder plans to do an election blitz in the final weeks of the campaign, sending a mailing and doing some phone calling. Voters won't see campaign signs with the "Yoder" name, however. "I'm opposed to lawn signs — I think they're a form of pollution."

Yoder was born in Michigan's thumb, but has lived 39 years in Farmington and another 11 years in Farmington Township. In addition to his council work, he also served on the city's planning commission in the early 1960s. He is past president and board member of Salem United Church of Christ, a member of the Farmington-area Goodfellow and the Farmington Exchange Club and a member of the Farmington/Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce. He is married and has two grown children.

# Personalities hurt Hills council, challenger charges

**Editor's note:** As the Nov. 5 Farmington Hills City Council election draws near, the Observer will be talking with the seven candidates and letting you know who they are, what they think they can do for the city, and how they stand on issues.

**By Joanne Mallazewski**  
staff writer

Paul Sowerby says he doesn't say anything unless he can back it up.

"I know I have a direct line between my brain and my mouth," said Sowerby, a former appointed Farmington Hills city councilman who lost to challenger Nancy Bates in 1989 for a two-year term.

But the Birmingham attorney has decided once again to jump into the local political ring because he believes that leadership is lacking on the council and decisions must be made — without the burden of personality politics.

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— Paul Sowerby

part, it's been lacking," said the 47-year-old former parks and recreation commissioner and zoning board of appeals member.

Sowerby, who received his law degree when he was 40, believes he lost the race to Bates in 1989 because of

the controversial industrial-research-office issue.

"The citizens of our community have spoken on the subject. As far as I'm concerned, it's the end of the issue."

Sowerby admits he doesn't mince



words — a characteristic he says frightened local politicians when he served as an appointed councilman for seven months. But he's quick to remind that he doesn't carry personal animosity following a council vote — no matter how controversial the vote.

**"THIS PERSONALITY** (on the council) thing has to stop. Let the issue be debated, leave the personalities out of it," said the 18-year city resident. "We're here to do the job. If you don't like each other, deal with that elsewhere."

Sowerby says he's got the ability to disagree without animosity. "I have the ability to disagree with civility and go on to the next issue. It's not issues dividing this city, it's the personalities. You can't be after a popularity contest. Vote your heart and conscience," Sowerby said at a recent candidates night.

As he looks ahead, Sowerby says a major challenge facing the city is the need to pay for services with the present tax base. The way he sees it is that if there's about 15 percent vacant land left — and only about 20

percent of that is developable — there's less need for zoning and engineering staff, for example. But with a growing population, there's a greater need for more police and fire staff.

"I'm not going to vote for a tax increase. I'm fed up with it. I pay so many taxes now. I'm suggesting the funds are there. I'm suggesting maybe they are not being allocated properly."

Roads, sewers and storm drains — the city's infrastructure — is also important to Sowerby. As far as he's concerned, it's one thing to blame developers for every ailment facing the community, "but the problem wasn't developers. It was with the planning."

**SOWERBY WOULD** like to reassess financing in the city. "I'd rather spend \$150,000 on a simple sewer connection than on a half-mile of sidewalk that will end in a wall or row of trees."

Like some of the other seven candidates seeking election to four seats this year, Sowerby wants a major study of the city's need for facilities. The city is faced with needs for senior adults, the library, the 47th District Court, for example.

"Before we rush out to spend money, we need to pull all these needs together. There's been a lack of planning in the past," he said. "You've got to slow down, step back, look what's been done. We have to find

out what needs to be corrected and what we have to do for the future."

Sowerby says he knows people think he's opinionated. Well, he is. And he likes it just fine. "I'm telling you how I feel. I can't change my mind."

Before attending law school when he was 36, Sowerby worked at Ford Motor Corp., had a sales business in Farmington Hills for nine years and worked in real estate.

"People look at me and say, 'He's got it all. He's got it easy.' It didn't come easy," said Sowerby, the youngest of 11 children. He was orphaned at three years of age and adopted by the Sowerbys.

**HE IS ACTIVE** in his church, St. Matthew Lutheran Church of Walled Lake, at which he is vice-president of the congregation. He's the immediate past vice president of the Farmington Area Republican Club and offers free legal counsel to the Farmington Hills senior adults at the Mercy Center.

"I am not a one-faced person," Sowerby said. For the last few years, Sowerby rides in a bicycle marathon for multiple sclerosis.

He expects to raise about \$5,000 for his campaign, which includes buttons, lawn signs, and literature. He's getting to know voters by having coffee klatches.

"I'm starting to get name recognition," he said. "My heart is in this. There is a need."

# Future of Peltz-MDOT land splits candidates, residents

**By Joanne Mallazewski**  
staff writer

The Peltz-MDOT property continues to divide the public and candidates seeking election to the Farmington Hills City Council.

That's why Farmington Hills city council incumbent Larry Lichtman says he suggested an ad hoc committee of members — to plan for the acreage — representing various interests in the city.

"We want to bring the community together, not find more ways to divide it," said the two-year councilman, a former planning commission and zoning board of appeals member.

Looking beyond the eight-year special parks and recreation plan that mandates nothing more than picnic area, access road and some hiking trails, Lichtman, 33, sees the need to develop the acreage "to its maximum potential for any number of civil uses to meet the ever increasing needs of our residents."

It's the city's job, he said, to ensure that the acreage does not become a very costly, publicly subsidized buffer for the adjoining subdivision (Quaker Valley).

**CHALLENGER** Paul Sowerby disagrees. "Leave it in the natural state," But Sowerby, 47, who was appointed to the council in April 1989 until the November 1989 election in which he lost to councilwoman Nancy Bates, agrees with other candidates. The city must buy more land now. "If land is expensive, so be it. Don't hesitate, get it right now."

A former parks and recreation commissioner and the treasurer for the first parks and recreation special millage campaign, Sowerby says he understands the need for youth sports. But he refuses to put ball fields on every available flat piece of land in the city.

"This is an emotionally fraught community. I really believe the

**'Just leave the property undeveloped. Leave it as nature intended.'**

— challenger Ron Oliverio

parks and recreation commission feeds on that," Sowerby said.

That's why the candidate believes change is necessary. Including the 1,696-acre, west of Farmington Road. "You're going to destroy a lot of natural beauty just trying to get back there (where there's flat land on the property)."

Six-year council veteran Terry Sever believes that with the city's commitment to purchase land for youth sports — such as the sold farm on Eight Mile — Peltz-MDOT can be preserved.

"I'm sure the voters will decide the use of the land, but I would hope the majority of our community would agree to not develop the land and preserve it in its natural state," said the owner of TL Printing in Farmington. Sever serves as council

liaison to the new youth sports facilities and hoc committee.

Challenger Ron Oliverio, 37, wants to see Peltz-MDOT left alone. "Just leave the property undeveloped. Leave it as nature intended," said the candidate, who lost his first bid for a council seat in 1989.

Oliverio, an investments vice president with First of Michigan Corporation, also serves on the city's ethics committee.

Challenger and former city councilwoman Joanne Smith, 65, says she hasn't changed her mind about Peltz-MDOT from the days when the parks and recreation plan went before the planning commission, which she chairs.

**THE CITY MUST** buy land for youth sports, Peltz-MDOT should be preserved. But if land cannot be bought for sports, there is a flat area on the MDOT property by I-496 that could be used for sports fields, Smith said.

"When I spoke before the council, representing the planning commission, I said, 'all of us thought the land should be saved,'" said Smith, a member of the Peltz-MDOT ad hoc committee. "I haven't altered my position."

Surprised that there has been a little criticism of her position on the Peltz-MDOT ad hoc committee — in light of her seeking election — Smith said she doesn't believe it poses a conflict. Another ad hoc member, Dennis Fitzgerald, parks and recreation chairman is Smith's honorary campaign manager.

Write-in candidate Andrew Rackowski, 22, wants Peltz-MDOT to be a "passive use" — "a family oriented park. In my opinion, this brings all the parties that have interests in these properties to terms while preserving the natural beauty of our community." Rackowski will begin graduate school in November. He is also in the Army Reserve.

Also involved are members of the Rochester and Rochester Adams High School Key Clubs.

"We really represent a cross-section of the community," Becker said.

The theme for this year's "Hoot" is recycling. Each acting group works its own skill around the theme.

**WHILE SOME** of this year's skits will deal with recycling, others are developed using "recycled fairy tales" as a foundation.

For example, one skit is a take-off of the famous "Wizard of Oz" story.

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# Dinosaur Hill Halloween celebration a Hoot

**By Brenda Dooley**  
staff writer

At nightfall on four upcoming October evenings ghosts, goblins and costumed creatures will take cover in the woods around Dinosaur Hill Nature Preserve.

There they'll wait, ready to entertain visitors to the Rochester nature center's annual Halloween Hoot.

Dubbed as a "screech of a nature walk," the event takes place on the evenings of Oct. 18 and 19 and Oct. 25 and 26.

After greeting guests at a bonfire,

guides will escort groups of about 20 through a 60-minute nature walk every 10 minutes beginning at 7 p.m. on all four nights. Along the trail, lit by luminaries, visitors will view short skits performed by costumed volunteers and members of local acting groups.

Rita Becker, office manager at the preserve, said the activity has attracted a host of performers since it first began. Those acting out skits include members of drama clubs at Rochester High School, Rochester Adams High School, Troy High School and Avondale High School.

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