

## points of view

## Need to change is message

THE REALTY SIGNS are starting to multiply.

I think that's the clearest remembrance I have of the recession in the early '80s - for sale signs remaining, seemingly forever, on lawn after lawn of our part of suburbia.

A recession seems to shake all of our parts up, like the snowflakes in a glass paperweight, only to see where they fall when they resettle on the firmament.

No where is that shake up more obvious than on the streets of our suburban downtowns.

THE BAD news is that businesses without staying power are leaving - and their employees are out on the street. The good news is that storefronts aren't necessarily staying empty, and some new opportunities exist for those with flexible skills:

- In Birmingham, Birmingham Stamps & Coins on Woodward is building a new, larger building next to its present site.

- In West Bloomfield, empty storefronts originally built for retail are filling up with a variety of small, mainly ethnic restaurants.

- In Rochester, downtown merchants are now open on Sundays and Thursdays and Friday nights. Downtown Birmingham adopted Sunday



Judith Doner Berne

hours last fall.

- In Southfield, NBD is opening a new branch office featuring special services for senior citizens in a part of that city in which 70 percent of the residents are in this age group.

THE MESSAGE is as clear to the small retailer as it is to the banking industry as it is to the Big Three. We must change our ways of doing business.

We must become more efficient, more service-oriented and offer merchandise and services which are well-designed, well-executed and appropriate.

If that sounds like the way the Japanese do business, it is.

But it wasn't always. Not so many years ago, the label "Made in Japan" connoted cheap, inferior goods to Americans. Now, it seems, it's the reverse.

It can change. It means going back

to basics and reacting to reality - not just in the short term, but for the long haul.

IF WE DON'T want our businesses, industries and storefronts vacant and workers left out in the cold:

- It's time for the American auto industry - the heart and soul of metropolitan Detroit - to make even fewer models. Throw out the ones which have been consistently shoddy and concentrate all efforts into a few - covering each price range - which have proven potential. And quit duplicating efforts. If the Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable are essentially the same car, just make one of them.

I would be happy not to have to decide among so many models - as long as I could pick quality.

- All car manufacturers should insist that their dealers be open on Saturday. It's truly amazing that even in this recession, many metro Detroit auto dealers are still adhering to the "Never on Saturday" rule.

It's no longer applicable - and hasn't been for many years. Close on Mondays, like the art galleries if you will, to work five-day weeks. You are retailers of a product which is the second most important and costly item most people purchase. Imag-

ine if real estate salespeople insisted on not working weekends!

- BUSINESS and industry must lend their power to make sure that all of our children are literate. Otherwise, they, as individuals, can't be productive - and we, as a society, will not only lose their input but continue to pay for their frustration through the welfare, drug and alcohol rehab and prison systems.

- Our public transportation system must not be abandoned, but improved with all local communities paying their way.

- The "me" ness of the '70s and '80s must give way to the "we" ness of the '90s if the Detroit area is to regain its spirit and quality of life.

We must acknowledge and act on our mutual dependencies - that the good and welfare of the entire metropolitan area rests on safe streets and the quality of schools, recreation, roads and transportation, goods and services.

When the recession is over and the snowflakes settle, I don't want us to have melted away.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

## Keep settlements open to public

LYNN ORR, reporter and editor here from 1976 to 1981, was a tenacious firebrand who constantly inspired her older and taller colleagues.

She covered a case where Ms. Teacher, passed over for promotion, sued a Redford school district for gender bias. Embarrassed, the board settled out of court for a sum - on condition that Ms. Teacher not reveal the amount.

Orr thought - correctly - that the amount should be public because the school district (a) squandered human talent and (b) paid for it with tax dollars.

But the ally devils on the school board never wrote a check directly to Ms. Teacher. They lumped her settlement in the fees they paid their lawyer, and the lawyer paid off Ms. Teacher.

TWO JACKSON County prisoners, beaten in their cells by other prisoners, charged jailors were negligent. One asked damages of \$50,000 to \$100,000; the other, six figures.

The county paid up but demanded an agreement that neither side reveal the amount, covering up official ineptitude.

The Jackson Citizen-Patriot blistered the county and opined the deal may have been illegal because no law allows such confidential agreements.

Enter state Rep. Michael Griffin, D-Jackson. His House Bill 5438 says: "An agreement to settle a claim or lawsuit against this state or a local unit of government that prohibits disclosure of the agreement or any terms of the agreement is against public policy and is void."

Strong words. It's now before the House Judiciary Committee.

I WOULD GO a step further and ban secret settlements by publicly traded corporations, too.

That would be fine with Stanford C. Stoddard, the Birmingham financier who was offered a settlement in five suits against Michigan National Corp. in return for a gag order.

Nuts, said Stoddard. Good for him. Stock in Michigan National is widely held.

Stoddard's publicist noted that a stockholder has filed suit in U.S. District Court against Michigan



Tim Richard

National for its failure to notify shareholders about extensive litigation and the potential large liability (\$57 million) to the corporation and its directors.

CORPORATE SECRECY over suits in public courts has been growing since 1986, according to Texas attorney Bob Gibbins, president of the Association of Trial Lawyers of America.

Gibbins' article, "Secrecy versus Safety," appeared in December's ABA Journal. He cites federal court gag orders that did specific damage to the public interest:

- Stern v. Dow Corning - a breast implant case where Stern won a jury verdict. A gag order "prohibited plaintiff's attorneys and expert witnesses from telling government regulators or anyone else what the discovery documents showed about safety tests." Even a medical school professor was gagged.

- Grundberg v. Upjohn Co. - a Halcion case. Plaintiff had killed her mother while under the influence of the sleeping medication. The gag order "leaves an unknown number of patients and doctors wondering what caused side effects."

- Davis V. McNeilab Inc. - "A scientist who himself suffered a potentially fatal allergic reaction to a painkiller - later withdrawn from the market - discovers that other victims were similarly affected several years earlier but were sworn to secrecy." The gag order "even prohibited discussion of adverse reactions in scientific journals."

Gibbins said Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Oregon have moved, either by court rule or legislation, to limit gag orders.

Michigan should be a leader. And thanks, Lynn Orr, for the idea.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

## Homeless, poor are with us still

WILL YOU SLEEP tonight in a safe, warm bed? More than 50,000 of your neighbors in greater Detroit won't along with millions of other Americans.

There's an old saying that the poor are always with us. I remember as a small boy in Detroit before World War II seeing homeless men heat large stoves in a fire to take into flimsy winter huts they had set up near the railroad tracks at 16th Street and Stanley. They wrapped the stoves in rags and slept against them on the dirt floor.

Some entrepreneurial lads I knew took stones from the fire and sold them to the bedraggled streetwalkers over on 12th Street, who stood on them to thaw their freezing feet.

THAT SAYING about the poor is indeed truer than ever today. A woman I know who worked hard all her life is laid off now and living in an abandoned home she heats with

kerosene. The house next door was torched after its drug-dealing occupant got his head blown off.

Another woman unemployed because of a spinal injury can't buy medicine and was evicted due to the state legislature's general assistance cuts.

Thousands of young mothers in Detroit alone are selling their bodies this winter to pay rent and feed their babies, and others will freeze to death or be poisoned by fumes or die in house fires caused by makeshift heating.

More and more of the middle class who aren't yet officially poor are in danger of becoming so due to the greed, bias and criminal negligence of people we've elected to govern us.

LAST MONTH the Garden City Observer encouraged readers to call City Hall if they wanted to submit names of families needing assistance from the Goodfellows who, along



John Telford

with many wonderful private organizations like them, have tried to fill the growing benevolence gap within public bureaucracies.

But we should also be encouraging people to call city halls and state halls and federal halls across the width and breadth of this nation to express righteous rage at what has happened to our economy. Then we must rise up en masse and vote out their occupants if they continue to underfund education and overfund the military.

I WISH ALL of the homeless peo-

ple in metro Detroit would take over the thousands of vacant public units and abandoned houses which are still bureaucratically barred to them. Municipal officials should recognize homeless citizens' human rights to do this.

We should also plan to provide additional affordable housing - not only in core city areas, but in suburbs.

Maybe it's time for a unanimous civil acclamation that our elected politicians be denied access to safe, warm beds until they activate the social machinery to guarantee every American that same essential right.

John Telford, a Rochester Hills resident, most recently was assistant superintendent in the Rochester School District. He previously was executive director for secondary education in the Plymouth Canton district.

## EXPRESSIONS

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Talbots

SPECIAL STORE HOURS: Open Sunday, February 2, 12 noon-5pm  
Our Twelve Oaks Mall store will keep regular hours.

Ann Arbor, 514 East Washington Street, Tel. 924-8080 • Birmingham, 255 South Woodward Avenue, Tel. 258-9696 • Grosse Pointe, 17015 Lakeshore Drive, Tel. 884-5975 • Twelve Oaks Mall, Now, Tel. 349-6500