

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48336 Tom Baer editor/477-5450

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Less of a town Farmington needs its Civic

WE DON'T like what we're hearing from the owner of the Civic Theatre, a downtown Farmington landmark that has made this community special over the years.

Business is bad at the Civic, said owner Greg Hohler in an Observer story last week, and if things don't improve, he may be forced to shut down the 51-year-old movie house on Grand River.

How sad it would be if the yellow and red marquee had to go forever dark. It would be even worse if the venerable old Civic were converted into one of those mini-malls with *giftie shapers* and offices for attorneys and Realtors.

Farmington certainly would be less of a town without its Civic. The Show, as it is known locally, is one of a dwindling number of reasons for people to head for the old central business district.

The Civic, one of the few surviving neighborhood and small-town theaters, serves as the anchor business for downtown Farmington. Other downtowns may have their department stores, but we have our Civic. It has added a traditional flavor to Grand River, to the entire community, actually.

THE PROBLEM, said Hohler, is not that people have stopped going to the movies, even though there seems to be a VCR in every living room and a video rental store in every other strip mall.

It's just the opposite. They are going, especially to theaters like the Civic where second-run films are shown at bargain prices.

Ah, but there are just too many of them around, Hohler added. There are 11 "discount screens" in a seven-mile radius of Farmington, he said. Of particular concern to Hohler is the Livonia Mall theaters, where movies — often the same shows playing at the Civic — are offered for \$1 a customer.

In an attempt to compete — and survive — Hohler recently dropped his prices from \$2 to \$1.25. He hopes the cure takes, but he's not optimistic.

"You've got too much competition in the area," he said recently. "Someone has to go and it's always the little guy. I'm the little guy."

Hohler points out that he's certainly no theater tycoon. He claims to be the last "exhibitor" in the Detroit area operating in one location only and taking a living out of it.

HOHLER DOESN'T strike us as the kind who'd be anxious to sell out to some developer with visions of parking lots or mini-malls. No, he seems to have devoted his life to the Civic. His father, Edward, opened the movie house in 1940 and son Greg worked there as a youngster.

He purchased the theater from his father in 1973 and went about turning it into a bargain house, a place where people could "see it in paperback."

These hard days and nights, he can be found selling tickets and goodies, running the projectors, sweeping the spilled popcorn . . . and doing whatever else it takes to keep the marquee lit.

There may not be much the people can do to save the ailing Civic. The owner of a movie theater has to face economic realities just like anyone else.

If the Civic makes it, great. The city will have a good start on renovating its downtown, which needs businesses that will make it the social as well as the economic heart of the community.

If the sign goes dark for good, well, then a huge chunk of Farmington will have disappeared forever.

But, as of now, the theater is still open. Folks in the mood for a movie and some buttered popcorn should remember the Civic on Grand River, just southeast of Farmington Road. Come on down, pay your \$1.25 . . . and maybe help save a landmark.

Ends soon Losing bus system isn't smart

WHEN IT comes to SMART, our regional bus system, we feel as though we're ringing a firebell in the night. And, figuratively speaking, our firefighters seem to be ignoring the alarm, encroached instead in a spirited game of fire hall checkers.

The fire metaphor, we think, is not misused when discussing the Detroit area's critically ill bus system.

A burning crisis looms: metropolitan Detroit would become the only major urban area in the nation without a regional transit system if the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transit dies of acute "deficit-itis" as planned on March 27.

Now, we've said it before, but it bears reiteration: It would be just plain dumb to allow SMART buses to disappear from our streets.

Although it makes the auto barons and used car salesmen snicker and smile, such a public transportation crisis would be a terrible blow to an area that doesn't really need that kind of kick in the groin right now.

SOME 35,000-40,000 people will be looking for other rides to work, or wherever, if SMART dies, and let's not forget the 500 or so SMART employees who would lose their jobs.

So, with a transportation disaster just a month away, the lack of concern you'd think would be shown by those public officials who have been elected and appointed to protect the public from just such disasters is ominous.

So is the lack of solutions you'd think would be offered from the finest political minds of Lansing and the city and township halls of southeastern Michigan. There's been no hell-raising at the county commission meetings. And blistering editorials in the big-town newspapers are non-existent.

No, if something isn't done soon, SMART will die a quiet death. With the exception of James Aho, SMART's acting general manager who resigned Monday, the truth is that very few of our movers and shakers care very much about SMART or its customers. Aho charged that the threatened shutdown was a political game in which the pawn was a regional bus system.

But there seems to be a general impression that bus riders are just a bunch of misguided fools who don't have the means or inclination to buy and drive automobiles to work, or wherever. Imagine that! People who'd rather not drive to work! Such people are damn dangerous in this auto town.

SMART'S REAL problem is that it's just a little underused bus system.

Now, if SMART were a man, a rich man, per-

**A burning crisis looms:
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haps a junk food baron who just happened to own a professional sports franchise, officials at every level of government would absolutely be going through hoops to help him prosper. Depend on it.

And the big-town editorial writers would gush their approval.

What little serious discussion there has been on saving SMART (the bus line) has been clouded by the foul feelings of distrust drifting up from this deep chasm that has divided city and suburb the past quarter century.

A merger of the Detroit and suburban bus systems is needed to save SMART, transit officials have told us. Such a merger seems like a good idea.

Some Detroit officials have opposed the merger because they don't want their tax dollars (\$40 million to support the city system) to support something that helps suburbanites.

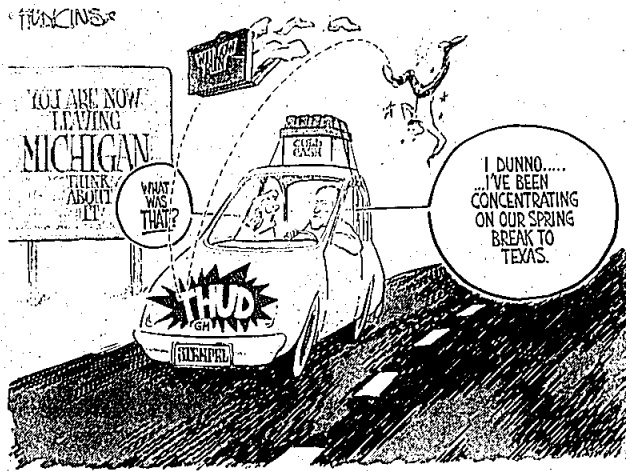
And so many suburbanites, spouting the "let's-buy-a-car" mentality that has been grafted onto their minds over the years, are always suspicious of anything linked to big, bad Detroit. The subsidies also might point to low ridership as an excuse for letting the system die.

ACTUALLY, A merger of the two bus systems makes a lot of sense — and city and suburban residents should be taxed equally to support it. Overall, service certainly would be upgraded and in time more people would ride.

The taxes used to support the new mega-system could come from varied sources. It could be a property tax, a license plate tax, a sales tax. Sure, people are taxed to death these days (or at least they'll tell you they are), but the burden would be shared among all in the six-county metropolitan area.

As we have pointed out before in this space, there is a price to be paid for having a good transit system. But our region is already paying the price for not having a good system. Notice, please, the decay in the central city and the gridlock in suburbia.

But most costly of all is the human price of being locked in place. It's time someone answers this alarm.



'Averaging down' has little room for quality

WHAT I FEAR most in the recent flurry of proposals to equalize funding between rich and poor school districts is that it will hurt the good schools and gain little or nothing in the poor ones.

It's called "averaging down." Both Democrats (whose ideology of equality usually leaves little room for quality) and Republicans (who complain ceaselessly about taxes without wondering what they get us) are about to compound their past errors by setting in motion wholesale averaging down in our schools.

Of course variations in per-pupil spending between rich and poor districts are both large and inequitable. Some districts in the Oakland County office belt spend more than \$8,000 per child; some rural districts, well below \$3,000.

Indeed, most school districts served by this newspaper have property values (and, therefore, per-pupil expenditures) well in excess of the Michigan average.

AND THAT'S WHY last year's so-called "Robin Hood" school finance law hurts local communities so badly. The tax-base sharing law takes half the growth from industrial and commercial property taxes in above-average districts and distributes it to poorer districts.

Farmington, straddling the 1-496 and I-275 freeways, would have lost somewhere between \$400,000 and

\$775,000 if tax-base sharing hadn't been stalled in court. It can pay salaries and benefits for 10-19 low seniority teachers.

For the losing districts, class sizes have increased. Special programs like computer education, music, art and foreign languages have been slashed. Morale is poor and declining.

Worst of all, there is no particular reason to believe that the poorer districts are necessarily going to show any improvement in their educational outcomes as a result of getting things spread additional money.

This is so because Michigan's totally archaic way of looking at education — that dollars spent, by definition, determine educational achievement — provides us no way of setting outcome standards for money moved by the Robin Hood law.

Indeed, to reduce educational quality in rich districts while showing no necessary increase in others is very close to a classic negative sum game. Everybody's worse off.

NOW GOV. John Engler wants to take yet another step. Earlier this month, he startled most observers by proposing to shift \$466 million the state now pays for teacher Social Security taxes into the school aid fund. Since this would rub salt into the wounds of rich districts (excluded from state aid), he



Philip Power

offered as a sop to repeat the Robin Hood law.

Seeing an opening, Democrats in the Legislature are proposing to move \$450 million in state-paid teacher pensions to the aid fund. And the new superintendent of public instruction, Robert Schiller, has made it clear that further "reforms" are high on his agenda.

All this would be fine if a realistic, accurate and widely accepted way existed to measure just what children actually learn in schools and to make sure that level of learning overall does not fall when people tinker with funding.

Otherwise, all we will have is an amazing and improbable alliance between Engler and the Democratic liberals in a redistributionist theory of school finance that sacrifices real learning on the altar of statistical equality of funding.

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

from our readers

Keep on saying 'no'

To the editor:

If Farmington Hills voters are given a second chance to vote on the bond proposal for expanding the 47th District Court, then certainly Farmington voters should be given the same opportunity.

What Judge Fred Harris implied (Observer, Feb. 6) is that Farmington Hills voters, or at least 400 of them, did not know what they were doing in voting no on the bond proposal.

Now all he has to do is re-educate them and the puppy they are the users of their ways. This writer believes they did know what they were doing and will continue to vote no on still another tax increase.

Also, this writer believes that if Farmington voters are given the same second chance to vote on the bond proposal, they too will turn it down. They must be given that chance. Judge Harris cannot have it just one way.

Farmington voters were not given an opportunity to vote on the sewer bond issue, which will add \$250 a year to our property taxes for many, many years. Neither did we get to vote on the recycling fee, which costs each homeowner \$66 a year.

(until it is increased within a year or so). Further, Farmington water and sewerage users will see a hefty increase in rates this year.

Our city governments must be made aware there is a bottom to the tax and fee barrel. Many people have seen their income decrease because of the recession and low interest rates on savings, etc.

These people must cut back on their expenditures to stay solvent. Government must do the same. When given the chance, citizens should vote no on any and all tax increases. A good place to start is by voting down the court expansion bonds.

Floyd H. Miller,
Farmington

Puppy auction is dangerous

To the editor:

The picture and story which appeared (Feb. 6 on Page 4D) in your paper raised an issue which is of great concern to us as dog professionals.

While the intentions of the fundraiser were admirable, the choice of a puppy as an auction item was mis-

guided and potentially a source of difficulty for both the puppy and new owner.

While the puppy's age was not stated, it appears to be around 12 weeks old.

More than a cuddly ball of fur, this is a social animal whose life will be entwined with its human family for 12-14 years. The acquisition of a puppy should be researched and considered in terms of lifestyle and time restrictions.

Using a puppy as a commodity, while emotionally appealing, is dangerous because it encourages people to view the animal as an impulse purchase rather than a lifetime commitment.

We are also concerned about the source from which the puppy was obtained; it would be unusual for a responsible breeder to release a young dog under such circumstances.

Promoting responsible dog ownership involves stressing not only veterinary care and obedience training, but also attending to the puppy's emotional development.

Getting a puppy off on the right foot with its new family involves a commitment of time inconsistent with an impulse purchase.

Mary Beth Jones,
Trainers Academy for Obedience and Behavioral Sciences,
Madison Heights

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