

# Opinion

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## Open primary New rules anger voters

**M**ICHIGAN'S presidential primary is history. The voters have spoken — and not just with their punch tools and lever-flipping fingers.

Some electors made statements by not voting in the March 17 closed primary. They said they'd skip it rather than register with (or declare for) a political party, something they said was an assault on their privacy.

Some vented their anger on hapless poll workers and city officials upon learning that they had to ask for a party ballot and then stick to the choice.

We're sorry for all the guff the poll workers had to take from disgruntled voters who really should have known the rules, even though the rules had changed for this primary.

On the other hand, we hope the national Democratic Party gets the message and goes back to the open primary system. Michigan has a long tradition of open primaries. It seems to be what the people want.

We urge the state Legislature and state party leaders to pressure the national Democratic Party to change the system, or give Michigan an exemption.

**VOTING IN** the recent primary was a confusing proposition for some. Voters who registered Republican before Feb. 18 were unable to change. Democrats, or voters who filled out the paperwork on election day, could choose a party at that time.

There were explanations in the press well before election day. Overall, however, the state and the parties did a poor job of communicating the new rules to the municipalities, where officials run the elections — and deal with the voters.

The result was an unusual amount of grouching and grumbling by electors in the Farmington area and elsewhere in Oakland County.

"They would not allow me to vote," said one of several unhappy residents who called the Observer to complain on election day. He said he missed voting for the first time in 30 years.

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"(They poll workers) were all very nice ladies, but when they asked me my party, I told them, 'I don't care to tell you.'"

"With all the wackies in the world, I'm afraid to disclose anything like that."

It's our understanding that 35 states have a closed primary system, while just eight have open primaries. Michigan had an open system until 1980. Since then, caucuses of one type or another have been used. Many state voters are confused and just aren't used to the new routine.

**WE'VE BEEN** told that national Democratic Party leaders — perhaps still smarting from 1972 when Republican crossover votes helped George Wallace win the state Democratic primary — have pressured state Dems to adopt the closed system. A state court this year upheld the closed system.

There are many sound reasons for returning to an open primary. A primary, like any election, is a vehicle for voters to make a statement on how they're governed. If they choose to cross over, as they did in '72, they're simply sending government a message — and making the political process more interesting to boot.

A closed primary is just a latter-day extension of the old smoke-filled room where decisions were made without the benefit of much public comment. The whole idea here is to open the process to as many people as possible. That just isn't happening when folks stomp out of the polling place rather than disclose a party affiliation.

So pay attention, party bosses and state officials, the voters have spoken.



STEVE CANTRELL/Staff photograph

### SMART move

Keeping SMART operating for another year must be found. For an editorial on the subject see the lower left hand columns on this page. communities, but a more permanent solution

## Focus our resources on quality, outcomes

**THE FUNDAMENTAL** upheaval that will reform Michigan's economy and politics for the remainder of this century is this: Our current economy and our political system cannot produce the revenues needed to meet the demands being placed on them.

The evidence: The state budget shortfall this fiscal year is now pegged at \$750 million, regardless of when the recession ends, we can expect continued enormous structural deficits between tax income and government spending.

Why? Compared to the rest of the country, Michigan has slipped:

Listen to Paul McCracken, professor at the University of Michigan Business School, former chair of the President's Council of Economic Advisors and all-around sensible guy. Michigan's share of total personal income in the U.S. dropped from 5.1 percent in 1965 to 3.6 percent in 1991. Civilian employment in Michigan grew only 13.5 percent between 1976 and 1991 compared to a 31.6 percent increase in jobs nationally.

"The basic problem we face," McCracken told the state Legislature earlier this month, "is that we have to focus more on strengthening the performance of the Michigan economy."

**RIGHT ON.** The big question is, how best to do this?

One obvious way is to concentrate on human capital, the set of skills of Michigan's people.

Paul Courant, a U-M professor of economics who knows more about what makes Michigan's economy tick than anyone I know, says: "In the world in which we live, the income and wealth of nations and states will be determined by the skills, broadly construed, embodied in labor."

"If the children of Michigan are to succeed in the world economy as adults," Courant concludes, "they will need education, from kindergarten on up, that is as good as any in the world."

**WHAT ARE** Michigan's prospects? Not very good, for three reasons:

1. A political system paralyzed for nearly 30 years over how K-12 education should be financed. This argument has diverted attention from a far more important issue: the design, management and working of the education system itself. Our political leaders have been feuding for years about who gets taxed and at what level. They should have been working about how much our kids learn.

2. Lack of urgency. Talk to nearly anybody involved in the K-12 system — teachers, principals, school board members, especially folks in Lansing — and you become alarmed at their relaxed attitude about what is a raging crisis. Getting something done about the quality of schools is a phrase that slips easily from the lips, but I don't see a lot of people who are prepared to clinch teeth, kick



Philip Power

but demand that something be done right now.

3. Parochial chaos in funding higher education. Every university in the state has its own legislative patron who works to extract maximum funding for the local institution. This might have been tolerated while Michigan was rich and there was plenty of money to go around. But that isn't true today.

My best guess is that the money the state has to pay for higher education — diffused among universities by current legislative practice — will sustain an overall level of quality about equal to Central Michigan University. I don't mean to insult CMU, but that isn't world class. And that isn't going to provide the research base to feed innovations into a thriving Michigan economy.

The political system must figure out how to focus our limited resources far better than in the past: on quality, on outcomes, on performance. It won't be easy, but it has to be done.

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

## Transit costs

### Keep an open mind on SMART

**S**OUTHEAST Michigan must pay more for mass transit.

But our mass transit system must be more responsive to the communities — and taxpayers — it serves.

SMART officials will soon be visiting local councils and commissions, seeking support for a new transit tax.

We urge community leaders to keep their minds open.

Whether it's a sales tax or a property tax, there's no question mass transit in our region cannot survive without it.

The problem isn't that we've been paying too much for mass transit. It's that we've tried to do it on the cheap.

**UNLIKE EVERY** other major metropolitan area, our region has steadfastly refused to support its bus lines with a stable, regional tax.

We chose instead to depend upon government grants and rider fares.

The result: Grants dried up, services were terminated and ridership declined.

So what, critics say. Metro Detroit can survive without mass transit. Our region is already heavily dependent upon the automobile, with a larger number of people living ever-further from the central city.

But far more people still live in Southfield and Livonia than Brighton and Holly.

If we are to curb urban sprawl — keeping existing businesses and neighborhoods stable, keeping traffic flowing — viable, dependable mass transit is a must.

That is precisely what we don't have now.

**MASS TRANSIT'S** local history has been a herky-jerky thing — a story of services begun, then abandoned.

Despite a recently-announced reprieve, SMART will cease operating by mid-1993.

SMART's shut down would mean Metro Detroit would abandon mass transit at a time when other regions are expanding commuter services.

Even such far-flung metro regions as Los Angeles and San Diego are investing in their mass transit systems.

Likewise, stable transit service has been a too-often overlooked factor in keeping older metro areas alive.

SMART — the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation — seeks merger with Detroit transportation department bus lines.

Such a move would save millions of dollars each year.

**RIGHT NOW,** SMART can transport passen-

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gers into the city or out of the city but not from place-to-place inside the city. This leads to a wasteful duplication of services between SMART and DPO.

Thus far, a merger isn't guaranteed. Detroit supports mass transit from its general fund budget and city officials said suburbs, too, must begin supporting mass transit before a merger can proceed.

Detroit could expand suburban bus services if SMART were to fold. But whether it would add suburb-to-suburb service, or even give suburban communities much say in setting routes and fares, is uncertain.

The best solution, a board with proportional representation from city and suburbs, should be a by-product of the merger.

Suburban mass transit is worth saving even without a merger, however, provided local communities take a greater role in its operation.

**SMART'S RECENT** history shows just how important local scrutiny can be.

Pushed to the brink, SMART officials recently accomplished more in just a few weeks than they had in years.

Union contracts were settled, surplus reserves drained and — most importantly — union workers and mid-level managers were encouraged to offer cost-cutting recommendations of their own.

It leads us to ask: Who was minding the store all these years?

The answer, sadly, is no one.

Despite being around for more than two decades, suburban mass transit generated too little interest, for too long, among county and local officials.

Don't ask for money, suburban officials seemed to say, and we won't ask you to be fiscally responsible.

Now the time has come for both.

Mass transit hasn't been a success in metro Detroit, at least not recently.

But it hasn't been given a fair chance. This is the time to give it that chance.

### from our readers

#### Good luck, but find a new name

To the editor:

I read with amusement the front page article in the March 16 edition of the Farmington Observer regarding the organization of the "Uptown Shopping District on Orchard Lake Road" between 12 and 14 Mile roads.

Are these folks oblivious to what has been going on in this community for the past few years, or are they just "the new kids on the block" and haven't ventured out of their own neighborhood yet?

There is already an Uptown Farmington Business District in our community, alive and well in the Grand River/Orchard Lake Road area. Our by-laws were adopted in 1988 and were incorporated by the Michigan Department of Commerce in 1989.

We invite our friends from the north to "explore the lands in the south" and take note of the seasonal pole banners which bear the message "Welcome to Uptown Farmington" and the directional sign indicating the entrance to the "Uptown Farmington Plaza" at Grand River and Mooney.

**WHAT AMAZES** me more than the fact that the folks north of 12 Mile never heard of Uptown is the fact that the Observer ran the story

about the "newly designated shopping district."

Your bi-weekly epistle has been a good "friend" of the UFBA during our fledgling years and has run numerous news stories about our promotions and graciously accepted our advertising dollars over these past four years. How short our memories are as we all get older.

Anyhow, we wish our fellow business colleagues the best of success as they organize along the Orchard Lake corridor. We do suggest, however, that they select a different name.

John H. Richardson, DVM, director, Uptown Farmington Business Association

#### Enforce the speed laws

To the editor:

This is in response to the Observer editorial on March 12 in which the paper criticizes the 55 limit on I-275 and I-696, and tries to lampoon the speed enforcement efforts of the various communities through which these traffic arteries pass.

The rationale for enforcing the 55 speed limit through the suburbs is clear and understandable. Less clear is the unenthusiastic enforcement effort of our own city of Farmington Hills, especially since such an effort would be largely self-financing.

During periods of high density rush-hour traffic, we hear this din in

our homes, even in winter. Needless to add, tranquil summer evenings on the patio are a dim memory.

**WE LIVE** three-quarters of a mile north of I-696. The intervening landscape of trees, meadows and residential buildings is not adequate to suppress this on-going nuisance.

Obviously then, this noisy swath of disturbance affects many people, and lots of taxpayer money has been applied to the problem in the form of sound barriers adjacent to the freeways, with some minimal effect.

In spite of these efforts, and the on-going general discourse on safety, environmental pollution, energy consumption, and equipment deterioration, all fail to overcome the commuter's need for the stimulation, (freedom from boredom) associated with speed. (A forty mile commute at 65 MPH versus 55 saves less than seven minutes.) And after all, the offending traffic is passing through someone else's neighborhood.

And that is why we have speed enforcement on the expressways, sometimes.

Reginald S. Trotter, Farmington Hills

#### Opinions are to be shared

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

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