

Opinion

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Small field Few want to come on board

WERE SHOCKED... and maybe a little disappointed.

Monday, April 6, the filing deadline for Farmington School Board hopefuls, came and went with just three candidates announcing their intentions — and the district with a seat standing wide open.

Running for re-election this year is incumbent Helen Prutow, a longtime trustee with a solid power base in the community and elsewhere. She'll be joined in the race by perennial (is this his third try?) challenger Richard DeVries and dedicated board-watcher Joseph Svoke.

There's an open seat this year, trustee James Abernethy having bowed out, so we expected candidates to be tripping over each other for a chance to serve.

After all, the last time there was an open seat in the Farmington District, there were eight candidates. That was 1990, the year Cathy Webb was elected to the board.

And five years earlier, when there were two open seats, a whopping 13 hopefuls crowded the field. Helen Ditzhay and Jack Cotten were the newcomers to survive that memorable race.

Perhaps '92 is the year that the troubled waters of public education became a bit too rough for some people.

is the year that the troubled waters of public education became a bit too rough for some people. In the 1980s, when the good times were still rolling, we always knew where the money was coming from to pay for public education. At least we knew in districts like Farmington. Well, what a difference a decade and makes.

THESE ARE hard times for education. State government has been freezing and slashing and "recapturing" funds once used to provide what was viewed as a quality education. Farmington, like other wealthy Oakland County districts, is staggering under program and staff cuts made necessary because the state has recaptured millions in state aid.

Almost as tight-fisted are the local voters, who often refuse to approve money to make up the losses. Increasingly, the locals are distanced by age from the school establishment. They're feeling the pinch of a bad economy, too.

Maybe some stalwarts from the '80s are just giving up on what they see is an impossible task. School officials are being asked to do more with less, these days. Who needs the headaches?

We have noticed, however, that more people seem to be getting involved in Farmington school affairs over the last couple of years. We hope that the surprising lack of candidates doesn't signal an end to that concern.

Oh well, a smaller field does have its advantages. For one, with only three candidates, maybe the voters can be more focused. They'll hear more in a less crowded field — let's hope it's something worth hearing.

So now it's officially school board season. Let the races begin.

THE FARMINGTON School community, we think, contains plenty of committed, caring residents who are concerned enough about the education of our young people to run for office. The three running this year are examples.

It isn't an easy commitment to make. Board members must have time to attend almost all regular meetings, must study sessions. They also must be accessible to residents, students, local businesses, administrators and employees.

Some school trustees have wondered aloud which is more difficult and time-consuming: their regular, full-time jobs or this board business?

Still, we always had the turnouts before, especially when there was an open seat and no popular, entrenched incumbent to beat. That leaves one wondering what happened in the spring of 1992.

Well, it's a frightening thought, but perhaps '92



Politicos' campaigns show system in crisis

"America's only native criminal class," H. H. Henshaw wrote. Our political system is in crisis. Anybody who is angered, confused or turned off by all the shenanigans of this year's presidential campaigns knows it perfectly well.

But to reshape our politics, we must understand our political system. Here's a sketch:

WE ARE governed today by something unusual in American history: an entire class of political professionals — careerists whose life's work is seeking and holding elected political office.

Sustaining any new class is expensive: So the political system has evolved a complex financial support structure, as follows:

- Perks. It's more than automatic overflight protection against kited checks, but a range of tax-supported incumbent protection devices — big staffs, free mailing privileges and so forth.
- Salaries. If a politician's life work consists in getting elected, then it stands to reason his holding office becomes a full-time job. It's a short-jump from there to ransoming through big pay increases by voice votes (no record roll calls) at midnight.
- Bribes. Officeholders pay for expensive campaigns by soliciting and accepting bribes thinly disguised as "campaign contributions." Administered through political action committees and articulated by lobby-

ists, special interest money is today the mother's milk of American politics.

The consequence of this hermetically sealed system is that members of the political class are interested in dealing with only three kinds of people: lobbyists (for money), media types (for publicity and spin control) and other politicians (for deal cutting and competition evaluation).

This leaves out ordinary folks. Which is why so many people feel — correctly — that the political system is not interested in them or in their problems.

WE COULD tolerate such closed governance if it performed. But we have gridlock politics. Nothing gets done effectively or economically.

First big reason: bad candidates. Why? The political parties have largely abdicated candidate selection to the media.

Times past, practical politicians did the picking. They knew intimately the strengths and weaknesses of potential candidates. This process is now called "the smoke-filled room and is widely scorned.

In its place, we have the media selecting candidates, providing us with Great American Leaders such as George McGovern, Jimmy Carter, Michael Dukakis, Ronald Reagan. By demanding daily pandering from Jerry Brown or Bill Clinton, the media ensure that any nominee knows a lot about spin control but may not



have the capability to govern effectively.

In my own opinion, letting the media control anything of substance — picking candidates, governing states and nations — is a terrible mistake. That's not our job, and we're bad at it.

SECOND REASON for gridlock: Legislatures, especially Congress, can't act.

Congress dumped the seniority system in the 1960s. An unforeseen consequence was that no leadership device emerged powerful enough to deal with all the special interests and their money.

Result: Any public policy initiative far reaching enough to deal coherently with any of our problems is subject to a blocking veto by one or more groups whose special interest may be threatened.

Next week: What we can do in Michigan.

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

Wetlands House must pass Senate bill

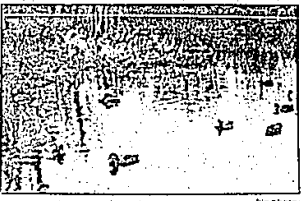
THE "INTEREST groups," as lawmakers call them, are all a little unhappy at the compromise over local wetlands. That means the Michigan Senate did an effective job.

Ordinary citizens, however, should be elated. As it passed the Senate, SB 522 allows local units to control building on wetlands, but keeps them from abusing their powers. That's important to Oakland Township, West Bloomfield Township and others trying to preserve wetlands.

The House should pass it, too, without change.

As first drafted by Sen. Paul Wartner of Portage, SB 522 would have pre-empted all local attempts at wetlands regulation. Realtors and developers wanted it that way.

In an extremely rare maneuver, the full Senate kicked Wartner's bill into Sen. David Honigman's Local Government Committee. Honigman, R-West Bloomfield, won high praise from virtually everyone for engineering the compromise.



A new wetlands proposal should keep both sides happy and ought to be passed in the Legislature.

• Close a loophole under which a wetland can be farmed for a year and then developed. This appears designed to prevent rural hanky-panky.

IN THE OLDEN days, wetlands were called swamps. They were viewed as a nuisance. Indeed, Michigan had a bad name among 19th century pioneers and land speculators because of its wetlands.

Over the decades, many were drained or filled in. And once again we realized that you can't mess with Mother Nature without unintended consequences.

Wetlands filter water before it drains into a lake. We need wetlands for clean water.

Wetlands are nesting areas for birds and breeding grounds for other forms of wildlife. You don't have big fish in a lake whose shores look like a golf course. Big fish need to eat little ones, and little ones need to feed on lower forms of life.

Florida newspapers these days are full of horror stories related to the loss of wetlands. Gulf Coast counties see political battles between commercial and sport fishermen because fish stocks have plummeted. Nature sanctuaries say numbers of wetland birds are down 90 to 95 percent. Homeowners report sadness at losing 90 percent of one of their favorite winter residents, Michigan's robin.

Florida is suffering from a disease of which Michigan has early symptoms. You can't fill in wetlands without upsetting Mother Nature.

Some folks like the compromise on Michigan's wetlands bill to a camel — a horse designed by a committee. Not in this case. Honigman's compromise — statewide standards supplemented by local expertise — is the solution Michigan should have adopted in the first place.

- THE COMPROMISE** would...
- Require local units to adopt the state definition of a wetlands. That should satisfy developers, who abhor a hedge-podge of definitions.
 - Allow local units to enforce state law on wetlands of five acres or more. That should satisfy local units, which are close to the scene and know their own topography better than state officials.
 - Allow local units to regulate wetlands of two to five acres. Again, that should satisfy locals and environmentalists concerned about small areas the state can't be bothered with.
 - Require local units to issue permits for wetlands smaller than two acres unless they can show that a wetland function would be impaired by building. Environmentalists attacked this provision because it put the burden of proof on government, not the developer. On the plus side, it prevents local units from being too picky.
 - Require local units to decide on an application to fill in a wetland within 90 days of its submission. The 90-day clock would begin running even if the permit were incomplete on submission. Developers, to whom time is money, should be pleased that these delays will be halted.
 - Limit local units to a two-step process instead of a series of hurdles such as a wetlands board, a natural features board, the township board and zoning appeals board. This should satisfy not only developers but anyone interested in efficiency and responsiveness.
 - Allow an owner who has been denied a permit to ask for downward re-assessment of the property. On this point, developers and environmentalists are agreed.

from our readers

School calendar a concern

To the editor:

I am writing this letter to express my concern and anger about our district's school calendar.

The broad issue is the amount of hours and days our children are actually in school. In a district such as ours, where teacher salaries compare favorably with those around us, our children go to school the bare minimum required by law and 11 of those are one-half days.

A phone survey of surrounding districts showed that we go fewer total days with considerably more half-days than any of our neighbors.

A more immediate concern, however, is the proposed 1992-93 calendar. I feel our district has become increasingly out of synch with all of our neighboring districts.

We get out much earlier in June and go back far sooner in the fall than nearly every other system, plus our school year is divided by increasingly long breaks during winter months.

This calendar not only creates havoc with scheduling for family vacation, camp and enrichment activities, it creates additional hardship for working parents needing programming or care for their children.

I am sure if our schedule were the

rule instead of the exception that the impact on our states tourist business would be considerable.

I would like to see this matter addressed with an eye towards taking days from our lengthy breaks in December and February and teacher conference half-days to bring our calendar more closely in line with the norm in other districts.

Shelley Glass,
Farmington Hills

District's funding is uncertain

To the editor:

Now that the governor has revealed his proposed plans for school funding, it is clear that despite rhetoric to the contrary, Farmington Public Schools and other school districts in our state are suddenly vulnerable in unprecedented and wrenching reversals in state funding policy.

After decades of state commitment to funding FICA and pension costs for all public schools, the governor proposes to shift the entire state FICA and pension liability to local school districts.

This comes at a time when our dis-

trict's financial future is already uncertain due to the potential negative effects of the November, 1992 ballot proposals.

Farmington Schools cut its 1991-92 operating budget by nearly seven percent last year after absorbing a \$5.3 million loss due to state funding cutbacks.

The district cut 154 positions from its budget, but that will only be enough to restore financial stability for this year and the 1992-93 school year.

State support for FICA and pension funding amounts to \$9 million a year for Farmington Schools. If the governor's school funding proposal is not thwarted during the legislative budget process, the school district will be forced to make additional permanent budget cutbacks beginning in 1993-94.

The governor's proposal would abruptly abandon a longstanding state funding commitment to local schools. In the name of equity, it would force local communities to choose between higher property taxes or diminished educational services.

In this era of anti-tax sentiment, it would make acceptance of the latter a matter of state policy.

If these facts are of concern to you, you may wish to contact your elected representative to express your views.

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president, Parent Advisory Board,
Farmington High School

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