POINTS OF VIEW

There's more to political signs than aesthetics

JUDITH DONER BERNE

The large Honigman sign on Farmington Road in the heart of Livonia caught me off guard.

I'm not used to seeing the names of Oakland County politicos in one of our Wayne County communities.

But of course, the new 11th U.S. House District, once presided over by a trio of politicos — William Broomfield, Sander Levin and Carl Pursell — will soon be represented by someone from Oakland County.

Indeed all five candidates, David Honigman (West Bloomfield), Alice Gilbert (Orchard Lake) and Joseph Knollenberg (Troy) on the Republican side and Walter Briggs (Birmingham) and Michael Meyer (Novi) on the Democratic, are out of Oakland.

But I digress. My real reason for writing this column is the sign itself — or rather, *the concept of political signs.*

They're important.

In this non-voting era, they are vivid symbols of democracy and the political process.

I know, I know. Politics is a tarnished profession. Politicians, at least on the national and state levels, appear to be putting party before the needs of the people.

But it is the process which can — and must — change that.

And political signs, tightly regulated and enforced by size and by how long a period they may stand, signal the vitality of a community and its residents' involvement in the political process.

Communities that deny them on the basis of aesthetics have a strange sense of what is beautiful.

Here's a tale of three cities.

- West Bloomfield allows the placing of any number of political signs with permission of the property owner, as long as they meet size limitations and are taken down immediately following an election.

West Bloomfield is a township where local offices come up every four years. The August primary lists 24 candidates for major local office, including three for supervisor, three for clerk, two for treasurer and 16 for trustee.

- Rochester Hills is a city which limits political signs to two per homestead.

Rochester Hills has a history of political activism, from the county incinerator issue to the large number of residents running for various offices. No city elections are coming up, but local library and road proposals are on the primary ballot along with the various U.S. rep, state rep, and county races. On July 15 the city council will hold a public hearing on whether to amend the ordinance to allow unlimited lawn signs.

- Bloomfield Township, where no political signs are allowed at all.

Bloomfield Township, which also has all its offices up this fall, has no one opposing the current supervisor, clerk, treasurer or four trustees and only one extra person running for library board.

I don't live in Bloomfield Township. But if I did I'd be pretty indignant that I couldn't campaign for my favorite candidate or issue in my own backyard, so to speak — if that was my way of becoming part of the political process. I'd think seriously about my First Amendment rights. And I'd certainly wonder why no one is interested in running against the local establishment.

As you drive the neighborhoods in our communities, from Rochester Hills to Canton Township, the communities that allow political signs signal populations that care.

Our sense of aesthetics depends on the season. A tree without leaves is ugly in mid-summer, but displays a stark beauty in the dead of winter. Pastel petunias planted in spring begin to look out of place as the leaves turn bright colors in fall.

Blocks of uncluttered lawns may be beautiful most of the year. But in a political season, color them sterile.

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

July 4th: Tapes, lies and a revered piece of parchment

SHIRLEE IDEN

As we observe the 216th birthday of the nation on Saturday, the Fourth of July, our revered Declaration of Independence, Constitution and appended Bill of Rights are still the bedrock of our republic.

Tapes, notes, lies and intrigue.

For most of our country's history, Americans have taken pride in the fact that our most significant exports were the principles of freedom and self determination that gave birth to this country.

As we observe the 216th birthday of the nation on Saturday, the Fourth of July, our revered Declaration of Independence, Constitution and appended Bill of Rights are still the bedrock of our republic.

Yet, there's an unease about what America stands for in 1992.

Did we secretly sell arms to Saddam Hussein of Iraq?

Did a presidential candidate plot to delay release of hostages in Iran for political gain a dozen years ago?

Does our government secretly do business with drug dealers?

Why did we invade the tiny island of Grenada?

Has the promise of America dried up for those who have no homes, no medical insurance, no prospect of higher education and no hope?

A symptom of the malaise is that while once great men wrote great documents to be publicly enunciated and proudly proclaimed to the world, now the notes and taped records of government leaders more and more are furtively hidden, later capturing headlines and coming on as the lead stories on the nightly news.

A decade after Watergate in 1980, the secret tapes of Richard Nixon, expletives undeleted, a man who thought himself above the law, were released and made accessible to the public at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Ten years later, historians today are fighting for access to many more Nixon tapes and papers locked in National Archive vaults so they can prove definitively if Nixon was central to the planning of the Watergate break-in.

Ironically, in the case of Caspar Weinberger, former Secretary of Defense, his own notes last week led to his indictment for culpability in knowledge of attempts to exchange weapons for hostages; knowledge of profits from weapon sales to Iran illegally going to the Contras and other matters. Weinberger was tripped up by his own notes that revealed the tale of his involvement.

In the National Archives, just a few feet from the Declaration of Independence, are provided 32 sets of earphones with which the public can listen to the tapes bringing history to life.

In fact, the Declaration came to a secure home 101 years after Jefferson wrote it and a committee adopted it, expanding on his list of grievances against the crown and deleting his denunciation of the slave trade.

From 1776 to 1877 the original parchment manuscript was kept in 10 different cities.

Twice the historic document narrowly escaped destruction by fire. In both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, Thomas Jefferson's manifesto was nearly captured by the British.

In 1894, already faded from exposure to light, its signatures damaged by frequent rolling of the parchment, the Declaration was locked into a safe in the State Department. From 1921 to 1952, it was kept in the Library of Congress and only since 1952 was it permanently exhibited in the National Archives.

If there had been audio tapes and tape recorders in 1776, we might listen to the unfamiliar voices of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Jefferson as they wrangled during the Continental Congress' deliberations.

In this case, only in fantasy, for there are no audio tapes, just the worn parchment of the Declaration.

It is hoped that on July 4, 1992, the venerable document still stands as an inspiration for Americans who believe in the rule of law, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (and freedom).