

Policy on setting costs fair, say Hills officials

BY JOANNE MALISZEWSKI
STAFF WRITER

It always starts with someone wanting something. But that doesn't guarantee an entire neighborhood is willing to go along with paving, water or sewers — or the costs that accompany the amenities.

Farmington Hills officials are aware of the concern and anger that the special assessment district policy can bring when neighbors disagree with the need for improvements. But they also stand behind the policy as being the fairest method with which to spread the costs.

"The policy of the city is that we will do what the residents desire as long as there is no health problem," said Tom Biasell, public services director.

If there is no majority, a project doesn't proceed. If there is a majority — 50 percent or more — the project proceeds.

But many residents — particularly those stuck paying assessments for projects they don't want — ask why assessment districts are re-drawn after a majority of residents oppose improvements.

"Does that mean those people are denied an improvement because these people over here don't want it?" Biasell asked. "So we look at what could be a reasonable district."

Even when only a portion of a subdivision wants water, sewer or paving, the entire subdivision is invited to the city-sponsored informational meeting, where residents learn about the improvement they might be requesting.

"On the basis of that they go out and petition so when people sign ideally they know what the project involves," said city engineer Skip Otwell.

Despite complaints received about the city's assessment district policy, Otwell said, "we have no vested interest. We are simply trying to please a majority."

Biasell agreed. "We are being above board. We are not trying to hide anything." To illustrate that, Biasell and Otwell said that's why informational meetings are scheduled, and why petitions now have cost estimates on them.

Both admit the assessments on Lyncroft are high, but the lots are also large. Costs are based on what it takes to serve that particular lot that will benefit from the improvement, Biasell said.

"The policy is an attempt to provide everyone with what they want," Biasell said. "If we wait for an entire subdivision, a project probably would not get done."

City officials, he said, encourage residents to do a whole subdivision, yet it's not a requirement. Altogether the city has created about 250 assessment districts out of about 255 original requests.

The special assessment district policy came about in the late 1970s. City staff determine the benefit to each property owner where an improvement is proposed and then determine costs based on that.

Road pavings are the easiest. The city charter says the city cannot pay more than 20 percent of the cost of a local road paving. That's because the city improves and maintains roads.

In practice, the city will pay the full 20 percent to repair a paved road and 13 percent to pave a gravel road. Water and sewer improvements are paid 100 percent by residents, Biasell said.

Assessments from page 1A

ing of special assessment districts so what might be a minority of residents can get water and sewer.

In 1992, a petition was circulated again — because one family on Lyncroft was having septic problems — but this time to only part of the subdivision, Lyncroft in particular. Six of 10 residents on Lyncroft wanted sewer and five of eight wanted water.

"They didn't carry over to the other streets because they knew there was opposition," Hurd said.

Trees damaged

Steiger, whose Evergreen trees were damaged during construction in August, agreed. "It just seems unfair to let the district be split off. It may be legal, but it doesn't seem fair."

To reduce the costs to each homeowner, the city figured the costs based on improvements on Lyncroft as well as Harlan Drive. "Do I need a \$40,000 bill at this time of my life?" asked Steiger who is retired.

Laura and Ted Schwartz agree. "We would not have bought this house had we known this would happen," Laura Schwartz said. "Some people might not be able to afford to live in a house after a stunt like this."

Residents also are a little miffed at some of the damage — not to mention their road being torn up — that's resulted from

■ 'For us, this is a hardship. We may have to sell the house.'

Ted Schwartz
Ramble Hills resident

the construction. Steiger in particular is annoyed with damage to his tall Evergreens.

At last word, city officials were sending out an expert to see what can be done. Meanwhile, repaving of the road is part of the assessment that's angered the residents.

But they aren't the only ones miffed by the city's policy that allows parts of streets and subdivisions to be split off to create a district.

A majority of residents in Biddystone Woods subdivision, east of Farmington Road, north of 11 Mile, have been equally surprised by yet another petition for water that circulated in a small portion of the neighborhood.

Some Biddystone residents claim the water is bad. The majority — and Oakland County Health Department tests — disagree.

The original petition calls for getting water for 10 lots, with assessments at \$11,350. If the entire neighborhood was assessed, the tab would be \$8,279 per lot.

Subdivision subdivided?

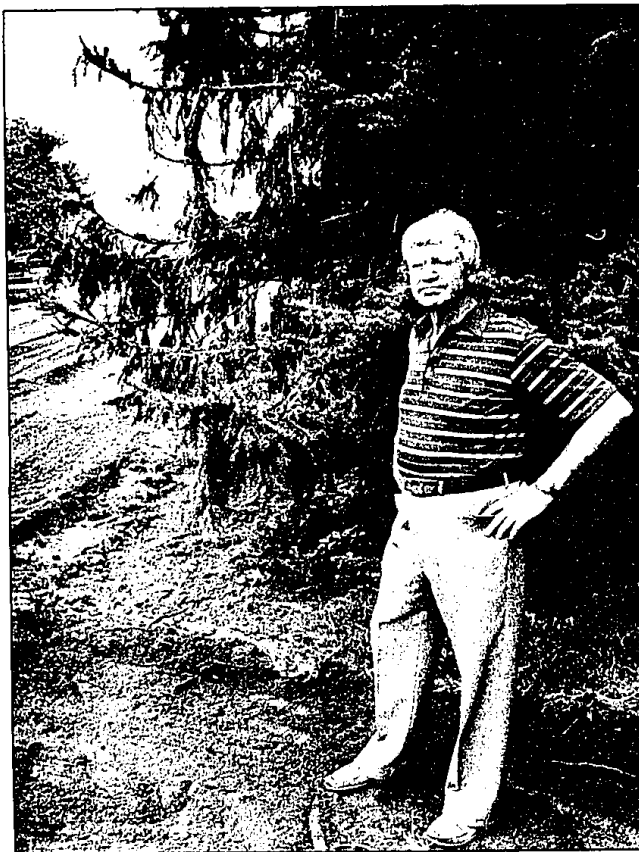
What bothers some Biddystone neighbors is the "gerrymandering" of districts so a minority can get what they want. "I don't think they should subdivide our subdivision," said Ruth Rycroft, Biddystone Woods Homeowners Association president.

While gerrymandering wasn't an issue for residents on Goldsmith, time and politicking among neighbors was and it dragged out a road paving request for seven years.

"I found it totally frustrating. I have some mixed emotions about it," said Al Hetke who supported paving on Goldsmith. "I think there was so much see-sawing back and forth because the city didn't take a stand. The city tries to play a neutral role with these guidelines."

Compared to the first time Hetke and his neighbors circulated a petition for paving and when it finally became a reality seven years later, costs doubled. "We had a majority then someone came out of the woodwork... the behind the scenes stuff that takes place is amazing," Hetke said.

Hetke admits the process of getting paving, water or sewers can be agonizing and can split what would normally be a peaceful neighborhood. "But I don't know how to solve it. It seems to be as fair a process as it can get."



JOHN STORME/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Damaged trees: Lyncroft resident Dick Steiger was angry enough about assessments on his street for water and sewer, then his Evergreens in the front of his yard were damaged during construction.

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Halsted-to-Haggerty strip of 12 Mile boulevard opens

At long last, motorists will get to use at least part of the new portion of the 12 Mile boulevard, from Halsted to Haggerty, beginning with today's morning rush hour.

Two lanes — one lane in each direction — will be open for traffic on the north side of the boulevard. Paving will begin on the southern two lanes of the boulevard in 1½-2 weeks, said David Call, Farmington Hills assistant city manager.

The two northern lanes would have been open last week but be-

cause of poor weather work fell behind on pedestrian lights, irrigation for landscaping and sidewalks.

"Some work will still go on but it will be out of the way of traffic," Call said.

While construction continues on the boulevard the speed limit will be posted at a decreased 35 mph. "We are asking everyone to obey the limit for the safety and well-being of workers in the area," Call said.

After the southern two lanes of the boulevard are paved, work will

continue on landscaping, sidewalks and the median.

The city's goal is to have the entire boulevard stretch on the south and north sides — two lanes on each side — open by the end of November.

The final opening will mark two miles of boulevard completed, including the Farmington Road to Drake Road stretch completed last year, and the Halsted to Haggerty stretch this year. The Drake to Halsted stretch has yet to be done.

Bride shop monitor 'frustrated'

BY GREG KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

Ed Grace is "frustrated and mad" less than a week after he was appointed to monitor the business activity at the now bankrupt Boulevard Group of bridal salons.

Store owners Gary and Donna Gottschling filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy two weeks ago. Oakland Circuit Judge Richard Kuhn ordered the owners to turn over financial records to the court and appointed Grace to monitor the stores' transactions.

The Boulevard Group operates six stores in Birmingham, Royal Oak, Troy and Dearborn, and allegedly left up to 5,000 customers in the lurch for dresses that were not delivered.

Grace heads the Michigan Bridal Association,

which was created four months ago by 10 area bridal shop owners to counteract the negative publicity generated by the Boulevard Group incidents.

But since he took the helm as monitor, Grace said he has received several hundred phone calls — more than he can handle. The company's books are confusing and the owners "have not been cooperative" in straightening out the mess, he said.

Grace agreed to serve as monitor because the Boulevard Group "created such a bad taste toward retailers we have to turn this thing around."

He said his own business, Go-Go's Bridal and Boutique in Farmington Hills, has suffered because he has had to devote so much time to the Boulevard Group problems.

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