

## So many mergers

### They impact local consumers

We've been reading the headlines for weeks now. Disney buys Cap Cities-ABC; Westinghouse buys CBS; Time Warner, which last year bought Advance-Newhouse Broadcasting, wants to merge with Turner Broadcasting.

Let's not forget the phone companies — Ameritech, Bell Atlantic, et al. — who want to jump into cable and snap up anything else communications-related that doesn't happen to be bolted down.

The summer of media mergers on Wall Street has big implications for Main Street. The changing landscape in corporate America, particularly in the telecommunications and cable television industries, requires consumers to be ever more vigilant.

Decisions about what cable channels your system carries and what kind of phone service you get, at what rate, will ultimately be made hundreds or even thousands of miles away from local communities — in board rooms where local issues are likely to receive short shrift when compared to the bottom line.

Take cable, for example. MetroVision — which had provided service in Livonia, Redford and Farmington Hills through 1994 — is now part of Time-Warner Entertainment, headquartered in New York.

Yes, MetroVision's local staff is still on hand to administer service. But they answer to a different executive suite. In Time-Warner,

they are allied with a multimedia conglomerate that carries a heavy amount of debt.

Ameritech, formerly Michigan Bell, keeps a strong regional presence in Southeastern Michigan. But the company is headquartered in Chicago, not exactly a local call if you want to talk to somebody in the front office.

Which is why local cable commissions and the state Public Service Commission, which regulates phone companies, will take on increasingly important roles in the communications revolution. They provide residents the best opportunity to voice their concerns about local service. They are non-partisan and have more clout, by nature of their collective power, than individuals.

But how many people know who their local cable commissioners are, or when the group meets? And when was the last time anyone called the Public Service Commission (1-800-292-9555) or attended a hearing on phone rates?

People need to abandon the notion that cable television is strictly entertainment, or that the telephone is merely a convenience. Phone lines, remember, are the data transport system on the information superhighway.

Information is power. It would be smart for consumers to recall this as the free-enterprise feeding frenzy among communication companies picks up speed.

## People make democracy work

Becoming involved in the democratic process isn't always a satisfying experience. You don't always accomplish your goal. By participating, however, people make our system of local, state and federal government better.

It's at the local level that the impact of one voice keeps politicians on notice that people can get things started and force change, even at times when their cause seems lost.

Those lost causes aren't always totally lost. Often groups form in opposition to a project, with the desire to totally stop it. They put together a grass-roots organization to accomplish that goal.

Group members attend public meetings, speak out, and at times file lawsuits. However, many times these groups run into what our government really is about, being a republic. It's not a pure democracy. That means the rights of individuals are maintained.

At public meetings in the suburbs, that concept is played out on an almost daily basis. There's that often-heard phrase: "Can't we vote on this and stop it?"

Mostly, the answer is yes and no. Yes, a public referendum can be conducted, but no, the project often can't be stopped. The reason is that the person or group putting together the project has rights too.

In Farmington Hills, a group of homeowners became enraged when the City Council approved a development called Timbercrest, a controversial residential and commercial project that would replace a wooded area near their homes.

The issue developed a bad case of the "uglies" when the residents decided to try to recall six of the seven Hills council members who supported the project.

The recall effort fell flat, of course. The concerns just weren't spread widely enough throughout the community, and they couldn't get nearly enough signatures on the petitions.

The recall try only added bile to an already bitter brew.

However, the residents were right to raise the issue. In raising the raucous, they accomplished several things:

■ They participated in the process. There's a renewed interest in local politics thanks to Timbercrest.

■ They focused the media spotlight on development problems faced by so many suburbanites, who feel deserted by their local government in the face of deep-pocket developers.

■ They reminded the council that government serves the people, not the other way around. ■ They showed government that some people will stand and fight for what they think is right — and not give up and just move to the outer limits of suburbia.

Another example took place in Plymouth Township, where residents have been fiercely opposed to the building of a new Temple Baptist Church on a 64-acre piece of property.

The church would have worship space for more than 2,000 members, a recreation building and an entertainment building, along with parking.

The initial project was rejected by the Plymouth Township Planning Commission. The church then filed suit against the township, claiming its right to freedom of religion was violated by the decision. The township has since offered a compromise plan, but the lawsuit continues.

Residents are still opposed and wondering why they can't vote to stop the project.

Democracy, the way we practice it, isn't always a pretty sight. But it's a system that serves us well. It's people standing up in public and voicing their concerns.

They don't always win, but even when they lose, we're all winners because they have chosen to participate.

### COMMUNITY VOICE

#### QUESTION:

What's on your mind?



'I go back to England soon. I'm a nanny.'  
Rebecca Smith  
Northville



'I don't know. Nothing much.'  
Kaitlin Frank  
Northville



Preschool. My son starts soon.'  
Julie Orlos  
Livonia



'My kids. Spending time with them before they go back to school.'  
Gary Pichais  
(with Gregory)  
Farmington

We asked this question at the Downtown Branch of the Farmington Community Library.



### LETTERS

#### Headed home

The Aug. 31 article Diane Gale wrote about the upcoming Farmington-Farmington Hills Heritage Home tour was fun to read. I'd like to add a few details.

This is the year to see eight of the antique homes of Farmington-Farmington Hills Sept. 16-17 from 1-5 p.m.

Our historical commissions and the Historical Society have been getting ready for this event all year. The Home Tours only happen once every three years.

Gracious homeowners of interesting historic homes are ready to receive visitors. The proceeds will be used for historical preservation projects.

Tickets are \$10 in advance or \$12 the days of the tour.

On tour days, tickets will only be available at the Farmington Historical Museum on Grand River.

It's a fun activity and also educational.

Ruth Mochlman, tour chairman

#### Take a look

Mr. Mokris' assumption (Points of View, Sept. 7) that education reforms such as inventive spelling are recent and "progressive" is understandable. Yet, he might be dismayed to learn that the "innovations" he currently approves of were tried and abandoned over 127 years ago.

Authentic assessment, whole learning, manipulatives, child-directed learning, self-esteem, no letter grades on report cards, teachers not correcting spelling or grammar mistakes, etc., can be found in an education magazine, The National Normal, published in October 1868. Current education reforms are not only not new, they have been discredited each time education "experts" rediscover them.

The most effective public and private schools have the characteristics of the traditional model, not the constructivist one. Regardless of socioeconomic or ethnic background, the methodology of the traditional school outperforms the other models in both the academic and the conduct domain. Gifted or learning disabled, affluent or disadvantaged — children achieve more in a traditional classroom.

Mr. Mokris may be surprised to learn that "the basics" not only don't have to be boring, but they also set a solid foundation for the complexities of advance academics at an earlier age. Mr. Mokris would also be baffled to know that the research has repeatedly shown

the "whole language" children are not more creative than their skilled counterparts.

If most parents are happy to send their children to school for reasons other than acquiring academic skills in the best possible manner, that's their choice. But don't expect me to make the same decision for my child.

Mr. Mokris can continue to accept these repackaged "innovations" for his children.

However, taxpayers must be told that the actual classroom research does not validate the expensive methods currently used in most of our public schools. Educators have been making reforms based on the same unproven hypotheses for generations. The uninformed public was duped in 1868, the 1920s, the 1940s, the 1970s and once again, now.

The research is available to anyone who wishes to take the time to find out which methodology actually works best. I took the time. I will be happy to share the research with any interested resident just as I have furnished the same to our board of education.

If you believe your child is capable of meeting the same standards as children in Germany, Taiwan and Russia, you, too, will question what is happening in our schools. As far as the education establishment is concerned, your ignorance is their bliss.

Patti Alspach, Farmington Hills

#### Getting serious

Surprise, surprise. The editorial, "Has the silly season begun?" in the Aug. 31 edition offers a glimpse of hope that the Observer is on its way to becoming a newspaper of serious note.

And it all hinges on one word that is adverbial, subjunctive, conditional, and even conjectural. But the issue it raises about the public service millage is monumental in scope: doubt, uncertainty, dubiousness, suspicion, and a gnawing, nibbling mistrust.

Thus, your grammatical use of "supposedly" in relation to the millage improving the city's police and fire departments mirrors a swelling public sentiment that evokes your queasiness about the millage being a panacea for what ails us.

Should you continue this vein of reporting all the news, both pro and con, you can rest assured that whatever the result, the people will have voted intelligently, fully informed, and ultimately, to the satisfaction of all concerned.

What more noble purpose can a free and democratically impartial press aspire to or hope for?

Albert Rosen, Farmington Hills

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— Philip Power