

Hills township, city, EDC owe lots to Bob McConnell

BY BILL COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

Being a founding father of Farmington Hills wasn't an aspiration for Bob McConnell.

The longtime public servant retired recently as chairman of the Farmington Hills Economic Development Corporation, ending a career in public service of more than three decades that he probably would not have foreseen.

"He had a lot to do with what kind of city Farmington Hills is today," said Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi, who has known McConnell since township days. "He had a vision for the city."

McConnell, 67, came to the United States from his native County Antrim, Northern Ireland, in 1954 after working in textile engineering.

"Six months later, I was drafted," he said.

McConnell served in the U.S. Army at the tail end of the Korean War and then came to Detroit to work. He met and married his wife June in 1958 and graduated in engineering from Wayne State University while working for Ford Motor Co., where he became a senior research engineer.

"I worked in safety belt systems, something I've done for 39 years," he said. "That got me into a safety niche."

Had vision for Hills

McConnell left Ford after 11 years and began an independent company. Now, with his son

Bruce, McConnell still works on seat belt systems and other components for the auto industry for his MSCP Sales, Inc.

But it was his political and economic vision for Farmington Hills that has held him in good stead in the city he loves. And the city's look and prosperity have a lot to do with the planning and abilities of McConnell.

"I'm grateful to have worked with him," said former City Manager Bill Costick. "Bob always worked to have a city with good, professional management."

McConnell's leadership qualities were put to the test early as he worked for sanitary sewer improvements while president of his association. McConnell found himself up against Township Supervisor Earl Teopoles and won the election.

McConnell wanted to change from a full-time supervisor to a managed city government and worked to change it. He was a member of the city's charter commission and became its first mayor.

"I was the last township supervisor," he said. "I wanted to set a precedent by stepping down as mayor after one year."

And until last November's election of Vagnozzi, the city had been led by a mayor, appointed by the city council, one year at a time.

Taxbase needed

McConnell served on the city council as well as the planning commission beginning in 1973,



Office with a view: Bob McConnell thinks about his accomplishments in Farmington Hills in his office in the Metrobank headquarters.

but found that in order to be a desirable place to live, Farmington Hills needed a strong tax base.

"That's why it was important to have an Economic Development Corporation, to attract business that could balance the residential tax base," he said, adding that business pays a large share of taxes and demands less in services than the residential sector.

The EDC, which has special bonding authority by state law, worked during McConnell's tenure to attract high technology and other desirable business while contributing with its share of bond interest to such projects as landscaping on Northwestern

Highway, the widening of Eight Mile Road and an engineering study for the M-5/Grand River/Hawthorn interchange.

"There was no risk to the taxpayers, and this generated about \$500 million that could be used by corporations," he said.

The goal was to have at least one-third of the tax base industrial and commercial, to have high-tech industries as a mainstay and to make sure the city managers worked to keep that balance.

Using tax-free bonds, the EDC was able to attract businesses like Bosch Corp., which invested \$10 million in its Farmington Hills operation.

"We could be selective," he

said. "We wanted to see what they'd done for at least the last five years. Overall, we probably had the cream of the crop."

'A great advisor'

At the same time, Farmington Hills had to successfully compete with Novi, Southfield and West Bloomfield, something its strong reputation as a "quality of life" community aided.

"The EDC really works behind the scenes to help the city's economic development," said Rick Lampi, Hills community development coordinator.

As he looks out onto M-5 and Grand River from his office in the Metrobank building, McConnell says he feels satisfaction

over the progress of Farmington Hills from township to city.

He's battled over annexation from Farmington and weathered political wars as well. Now, thanks to the EDC's contribution, he hopes he will finally see the M-5 interchange completed.

His stewardship of Farmington Hills is officially at an end, but as he pursues his favorite hobby of golf in Florida, Ireland, and courses closer to home, McConnell's influence won't be forgotten.

"He has been a great advisor, a deep thinker and a visionary," Costick said. "If anybody deserves accolades for what kind of city Farmington Hills is, it's him."

ON THE AGENDA

Below are highlights from the agendas of meetings this week. All meetings are open to the public.

Farmington Hills City Council

City Hall, 474-6115
Regular meeting, 7:30 p.m.
City Council chambers
Monday, April 15

Agenda items include:

■ A cost hearing to consider sanitary sewer installation for the north side of 10 Mile between Briar Hill Drive and Inkster Road.

■ Consideration of a special assessment district for water main improvement for Belfast Avenue from 600 feet west of Middlebelt Road to Westminster and Westminster from Belfast to 200 feet south.

■ Consideration of a special as-

essment district for road improvements for Rhonass Avenue and the north 300 feet of Drake Road in Section 33.

■ Public questions and comments.

■ Council members comments and announcements including discussions of a memorial tree planting program and area subdivision meetings.

■ Consideration of a request from County Commissioner David Moffitt to adopt a resolution supporting equitable funding for Oakland County.

■ Consideration of approval of the city's participation in the Michigan Department of Mental Health/Michigan State Housing Development Authority/Corporation for Supportive Housing Demonstration Program.

■ Consideration of the introduction of a bicycle helmet ordinance.

■ Consideration of approval of an agreement with the YMCA for provision of the youth services center.

Farmington City Council

City Hall, 474-6500
Regular meeting, 8 p.m.
Monday, April 15

Agenda items include:

■ Request for outside sales at Fresh Approach Market, 35243 Grand River.

■ Request for ground sign at Village Commons Center.

■ Request for parade permit by South Farmington Baseball, Inc.

■ Consideration to award bid for 1996 paving program.

■ City Manager's recommended budget for 1996-97.

Birds the word for visiting authors

Two popular nature authors, Don and Lillian Stokes, will present a talk and slide show on "The Amazing World of Birds" and sign copies of their new book at Wild Birds Unlimited in Farmington Hills on Monday, April 22.

The Stokes have written over 19 books on birds and nature with over two million copies sold. Their latest work is the recently published, "Stokes Field Guide to Birds," a photographic field guide to all birds in North America. The guide is available in eastern and western editions and is a culmination of the Stokes' life work, taking three years to research and prepare.

The Stokes will discuss bird behavior, tips to bird identification and the importance of backyard bird conservation. The presentation will begin at 6 p.m. Be-

cause seating is limited, reservations are required and may be made by calling the store at

471-7334 during business hours. Book signing will follow at 6:30 p.m.

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