

A civil community is a well-governed one

The maturity of a community is tested whenever controversy arises. On the same night — July 15 — two of our suburbs faced contentious issues.

About 40 residents of Beverly Hills packed the village hall for a public hearing on whether Detroit Country Day, a private high school, could put an inflated bubble over five of its 10 tennis courts so they could be used year-round.

Trouble was that it could be seen by residents of the Georgetown subdivision next to DCD, leading one resident to worry that Beverly Hills would become known as "Bubble Hills."

It was an emotional issue, in which property values and aesthetics were at odds with what could benefit young people. But, wrote Eccentric reporter Larry Paladino, "There was no shouting, finger pointing or arguing. And there were no bitter words."

Everyone who wanted to — 19 in all — spoke, with council president

John Mooney working to alternate those who were for and against. By a 5-2 vote, the bubble was turned down, Paladino reported.

Afterward, several people spoke of the civility of the process saying it should set an example for other communities when dealing with controversial issues.

That same evening in West Bloomfield, the township board had on its agenda the question of whether an appointed township superintendent should replace the currently elected supervisor.

This issue also drew a packed house, including supporters of the current supervisor and those of her opponent in the upcoming Aug. 6 Republican Primary.

Feelings ran high on the question itself as well as the propriety of bringing it up in the midst of an election. Comments were heated. The audience responded in kind. And finally a township resident was physically removed from the podium by the

police chief, according to reporter Jennifer Placinto. Later, he filed a lawsuit, charging he was denied his constitutional rights.



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By a 5-2 vote, the board agreed to put the item on the ballot in 1998, subject to a citizens committee study. In fact little but rhetoric was accomplished, since even one trustee who voted for it characterized it as "an advisory decision."

So I was wondering what might occur in Birmingham at a July 31 forum at the Baldwin Library on a proposed public sculpture by internationally-known artist Alice Aycock,

which has been commissioned with private funds still to be raised.

Published photographs and the model, on display in the lobby of the library, had prompted a passionate dialogue around our towns and the pages of the Birmingham-Bloomfield Eccentric. In general, those who don't like it consider the large, abstract piece both unattractive and inappropriate to Birmingham. Those who do are excited by its energy and the attention it will bring to that city.

It was standing room only at the meeting. The audience sat respectfully through a presentation designed to inform and educate including a video tape of Aycock in which she explained both the aesthetics of the work and details of its construction.

Then it was time to hear the views of the community as to why it was or wasn't an appropriate icon for the city. "I feel like yelling out the emperor has no clothes," said longtime resident Betty Gitten who also said she resented having the sculp-

ture shoved down her throat.

But to Birmingham gallery owner Lee Hoffman, "It is exhilarating, it is joyful."

Probably few minds were changed. No, those who called for a public referendum will not have it, since it is a gift to the city.

But it was heartening that the forum certainly was much closer to the example set by Beverly Hills than West Bloomfield. And that at night's end, moderator Dr. William Ritter, minister of Birmingham's First Methodist Church, could thank the crowd for "the civility of the discourse" — the mark of a mature community.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers and vice president of the Cultural Council of Birmingham-Bloomfield. You can comment on this column at (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1997 or by writing or faxing a letter to the editor.

Religious groups lobby toward national theocracy

One night last month, Pat Robertson promised his "700 Club" TV audience an expose of the Internal Revenue Service, a federal agency he deplored as dangerous and tyrannical.

Other media told "the rest of the story."

Robertson's Christian Coalition gets an entire chapter in a new book called Dirty Little Secrets: The Persistence of Corruption in American Politics by Larry Sabato (a political scientist at the University of Virginia in Robertson's home state) and Glenn Simpson (investigative reporter now with the Wall Street Journal).

The gist: The Christian Coalition was set up as a tax-exempt "social welfare organization" but was quickly turned by Ralph Reed into a political campaign organization, though its articles of incorporation made no mention of plans to do political cam-

paigning. It found itself constantly under attack from the Federal Election Commission and the IRS. (Michigan is identified as a particular hotbed of CC activity, as readers of this column for the last four years know.)

The Federal Election Commission on July 30 filed suit in U.S. District Court, charging the CC improperly aided Republican candidates with its voter guides.

Mitchell Research and Communications, an outfit well known in the western suburbs, conducted a poll for The Detroit News indicating Republican voters in Michigan are disturbed and divided about the clout of anti-abortion forces — their "my way or the highway" attitude.

In reality, there are a batch of organizations that overlap into what is loosely called the "religious right." Michigan Family Forum, an affiliate



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of another national outfit, is one; RTL is there with its focus on abortion and assisted suicide; Mackinac Center, though it dislikes the religious tag, should be counted because of its aid to and advocacy of government money for religious schools.

Nationally and particularly in Michigan, the Grand Old Party has a big problem with the religious right's alienation of moderates. Time Magazine, in its cover story last winter on

the CC's Ralph Reed, said it best: The religious right can't nominate a top-of-the-ticket candidate, but it can prevent anyone it doesn't like from being nominated.

Democrats, again particularly in Michigan, have had the same trouble with their iron-fisted domination by the AFL-CIO labor wing.

What, then, is wrong with such groups' playing the political game and winning? Shouldn't we admire them for strategizing, working and winning? Yes, but:

• Both big labor and big religion have a propensity to label their side as "right" or "saints" and all others as "wrong" or "sinners."

• Big religion portrays itself as persecuted by government, as under attack because it believes in heterosexual procreation and Jesus.

• Big religion's goal is a theocracy, religious control of government. It

goes far beyond outlawing abortion and assisted suicide. It seeks government-sponsored prayer, government-sponsored Bible reading, government-recognized status for "creationism" in science classes, government money for religious schools (which first are to be relieved of the burdens of "bureaucratic red tape" such as qualified teachers, qualified administrators and a core curriculum). It seeks church-dominated "parental advisory" committees to make curriculum policy in place of elected school boards and openly-hired administrators.

In 1994 Democratic gubernatorial nominee Howard Wolpe had a public employees' union tiger by the tail, and it ate him up. This year Bob Dole and Gov. John Engler have a religious tiger by the tail.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

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