

POINTS OF VIEW

New Year ins and outs in our towns

The beginning of 1997 is a perfect excuse for a random list of what's in and what's out in our towns:

In: Senior housing. West Bloomfield, Troy and Rochester Hills, long bereft of those kinds of facilities, are considering proposals. In West Bloomfield, the Old Town Hall on Orchard Lake Road is expanded to be managed by Regent Street Inc. to provide 61 assisted living beds. In Troy, the Damone Group of Troy plans to put up two assisted living centers containing 150 beds at Long Lake and Northfield Parkway. And the Rochester Hills planning commission recently gave new life to the Singh Development Co. bid to construct an 119-unit assisted living facility at Rochester Road, just south of Tiencen.

Out: Package stores and restaurants that sell liquor to minors. Police in our communities continue to run sting operations to ferret out businesses that sell without requiring proper identification. Two newcomers to Troy - Nordstrom and J. Alexander's - both at Somerset were among just a handful of restaurants and package dealers given Liquor Control Commission Violations

in a pre-holiday sweep by Troy police. The going is tough, and many fewer businesses are found breaking the law.

In: Public transportation. You of course remember when officials in some of our towns refused to let us vote on a county-wide tax to insure the SMART bus service. Now, one by one, they're seeing the error of their ways. West Bloomfield and Bloomfield townships have both held local elections in which taxpayers voted to join SMART and Walled Lake is about to do the same. Meanwhile, West Bloomfield and Bloomfield are taking steps to work together to provide personalized, inter-community SMART small bus service for those who need it.

Out: Parents who don't parent their children. All communities will be watching Southfield as its parental responsibility law, expected to become official Jan. 30, takes hold. Under the ordinance, a parent of a juvenile who commits a crime would be subject to a civil fine of up to \$500, if found to be ineffective or negligent as parents. Let's hope that judges also see fit to



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add compulsory attendance at parent-ings classes to the penalty.

In: Caneceating town meetings. In West Bloomfield, not only are the sessions of the township board telecast, but so are those of several elected and appointed boards. In Farmington Hills, the council is considering replaying taped city council meetings to give residents more than one chance to see their city in action. So it should make Troy, an enlightened community in so many respects, feel ashamed at their council's continued refusal to have its sessions telecast live. Hate off to Troy

resident Joyce Haseo who has been tagged the stage manager and to the TCI public access cable channel for airing them at a later date.

Out: An unattractive, illogical Woodward Avenue. Bravo to the efforts to upgrade metro Detroit's renowned main street and to make it easier to find businesses along it. The Woodward Avenue Action Association has a long-range plan to beautify the median. Short-range, Hunter will be renamed Woodward and Woodward changed to Old Woodward in Birmingham with businesses assigned more logical addresses. Yay!

In: Horses in our suburbs. A 1996 ordinance allows horseback riding in West Bloomfield's Marshbank Park. At Rochester High, the school's equestrian club is neigthing to become a varsity sport. And in Rochester Hills, Tootsie the horse may have received a reprieve from a court-ordered eviction thanks to community activist Gerald Robbins. Robbins is raising money and enlisting volunteers to build a more effective fence to keep Tootsie from wandering into neighbors' yards. "One of the rea-

sons I moved out here is because there were places that people could ride horses," he said.

Out: Playing politics with the arts. Shame on Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson and his so-called director of arts, culture and film, Steve Weikal, for lobbying against allowing us to vote on a regional tax to support area arts institutions. Although legislators failed to pass it, a recent poll shows considerable support in both city and suburbs for the bill, introduced by State Senator Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham. Oakland County residents probably make as much use of what Bouchard rightly calls "those gems" as any group. And strong cultural institutions in the metro-Detroit area can only enhance our quality of life in Oakland County, in 1997 and beyond.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of The Eccentric Newspapers. You can comment on this column by calling (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1997 or by writing or faxing, (810) 644-1314, the editor of this newspaper.

Some people just go out of their way to be nice

You don't hear much about nice people anymore. Certainly not in newspaper columns. We tend to write about things that irritate us.

Not this time though. This one's about nice people.

When the father-in-law died a few days before Thanksgiving, things were in a state of turmoil around our house. The Feminist was on one phone frantically trying to get airline reservations for five. I was on the other line canceling deliveries and appointments.

When she finally got a flight booked it was for 6:30 a.m. Saturday. We had to be at the airport by 5. No problem. Rick the real estate man — The Other Feminist's husband — showed up at our house at 4 a.m. to chauffeur the five of us to the airport. And when we returned — on Thanksgiving Day — he was there to pick us up.

While we were gone, he kept an eye on the house (even rigging up a timer so the lights would go on and off at

appropriate times) and made sure the cats were fed. Rich the neighbor across the street brought in the mail and the newspapers, and Amy, The Eighth-Grader's buddy, covered her baby sitting jobs for her.

In Florida, the mother-in-law's neighbors went beyond the call. On Saturday Ron, who lives across the street and had always watched over the in-laws like some kind of guardian angel, brought over a giant platter of cold cuts, cheeses and relishes, along with a large dish of homemade potato salad from another neighbor.

On Sunday, Barbara, Ron's sister-in-law, took over. She delivered a lasagna and enough bread sticks for the seven of us who were there, but only after checking first to see if we wanted extra cheese on the lasagna. On Monday, it was a chicken and rice casserole.

On Tuesday, Uncle Tommy, a relative, sent over a whole barbecued ham. And on Wednesday, the incredible



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Barbara, knowing that we were going to fly home on Thanksgiving Day, prepared and delivered an entire Thanksgiving dinner. The whole works — a smoked turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, green beans, gravy, a platter of deviled eggs, a relish tray with vegetables and dip, homemade cranberry sauce and a pumpkin pie. That, despite the fact that the next day she had to do it all over again for her own family.

Nice people. Friends and neighbors. But it was the man from Maine, a

complete stranger, who literally went out of his way to help. He was the driver of the DOTS Shuttle bus that picked us up at the Orlando airport and drove us the 50-or-so miles to Deland. During the trip we told him why we were in Florida and also found out that his accent was exactly what it sounded like: He was a transplanted down-easter in his 60s, who had moved to Florida about nine years ago.

When we mentioned that we were returning to Michigan on Nov. 28, he said, "Wait a minute. Is that Thanksgiving Day?"

It was, and there was a problem. While we had a prepaid return reservation, it was booked as open-ended, no return date listed. And Thanksgiving and Christmas were the only two days of the year that the DOTS shuttle didn't run.

He thought about it for a few miles, then radioed the dispatcher and told

him to call the supervisor and ask her if she would authorize a special run on Thanksgiving Day. Ho'd drive us to the airport himself. It was no problem, he said. He could still get back home in time for Thanksgiving dinner.

The word came back "No," but when he dropped us off in Deland he took our phone number and said he'd work on it.

The day before Thanksgiving, someone from DOTS called. There would be a bus in Deland at 9 a.m. Thanksgiving Day to take us to the airport. When it pulled to a stop in the parking lot, the man from Maine got out, smiled at us and said simply, "I won."

I didn't even get his name. But in a long list of nice people, his should be at the top.

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Cable rates hikes zoom past rate of inflation

If you read a stack of community newspapers, such as those produced by this company, one issue stands out nearly everywhere. Although there are several cable television companies, most articulate folks hate the local cable firm, and for the same reasons.

Once they get the franchise, cable TV companies hike rates faster than inflation. And while people in different towns deal with different cable companies, we tend to cuss them out in the same language.

That thought occurred as I paid my own January cable bill. The notice said the cable company "has adjusted some of its monthly service rates." "Adjusted," my eye. The total bill is up 10 percent. The regulatory fee paid to the Federal Communications Commission is down 20 percent, from 5 cents a month to 4 cents, but the big ticket items are mostly up.

"Standard cable service" is up 12.1 percent to \$16.12. Combined broadcast basic and standard service is up 10.3 percent to \$26.42. And the addressable converter fee is up 18.9 percent to \$2.08. Some "adjustment."

The cable company added insult to injury by enclosing a customer survey. Here are some of the significant questions: "Have you ever spoken with one of our customer service representatives? If so, how would you rate the customer service representatives when you've called or visited our office?"

"Have you ever had a technician come to your home for a service call? If yes, how would you rate our repair service? How do you rate our billing service?"

The survey is a phoney, of course, and designed by the company to make itself look good. It offers a prize, which taints the process. And it fails to ask the real questions that people discuss. Here's what an honest cable TV survey would ask:

• We are raising our basic service rate 10 percent. Did you get a 10 percent pay raise this year?

• We are eliminating CICO, the Canadian public channel with its arts and drama programs, and substituting a home shopping channel. Do you approve?

• What do you think of the way we promote high-price programs such as boxing matches or first-run movies on a pay-per-view basis?

• What do you think of the increasing number of one-star and two-star movies shown on



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premium channels? Do you suspect the networks are deliberately reducing their quality to prompt you to buy "pay-per-view" programming?

The cable company's alibi is that "costs" are up. What they hide is the fact that costs have two components — price per unit and the number of units (customers).

For example, suppose the price per unit is \$1 and the company has 10,000 customers. Its total cost is \$10,000, right?

Now suppose the unit price drops to 90 cents, but the number of customers rises to 12,000 as more homes are wired in. The total cost now is \$10,800, an increase, even though the price per unit has dropped.

Do you see the little mathematical trick the cable company plays?

Moreover, in this example, the cable company's total costs have risen, but so has its revenue, even if fees stay the same. It serves 20 percent more homes. It switches from a commercial-free educational channel to one where it can sell sponsors, so advertising revenue rises.

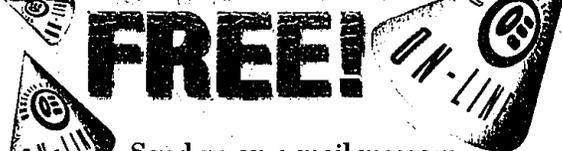
In short, the alibi of a "cost" increase doesn't begin to justify a fee increase that's more than triple the rate of inflation.

Your impulse will be to call your local franchise authority, in either city hall or township hall. Will that do any good? Doubtful, because as I said at the outset, the handful of cable companies operate pretty much the same way. They blather about "competition" when they bid for a franchise, but once the contract is awarded, each has a monopoly and makes the most of it.

What to do about it? I'm not certain, but I have this environmental book that I got for Christmas called "A Sand County Almanac." Maybe we all should read more. The price of a library card still is zero.

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

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