

POINTS OF VIEW

Retiring chief of SEMCOG excelled at balancing act

John Amberger will retire at the end of March as executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the seven-county planning organization.

"I was really born for this job," said Amberger, 67, of Livonia. "As the middle of five children, I was the mediator and collaborator. I couldn't imagine a better life."

Amberger has enjoyed nearly rave reviews by SEMCOG's elected officials as he walked the tightrope of tensions between Detroit and the suburbs and between built-up and developing communities.

"My wife is retired, and she wants to travel. I'll work until March. I'm looking at opportunities to think, read and write ... the kinds of things that are done in universities," he told the Jan. 30 executive committee meeting.

The executive committee promptly set up a 20-member committee with only one item on its Feb. 13 agenda: whether to promote Deputy Director Paul Tait of Ypsilanti to the top post or engage in a statewide or national search.

Betting odds are that Tait will get the nod, in the same way Amberger's predecessor, Michael Glusac, groomed and nominated Amberger as his successor 16 years ago. The panel is due to report at the Feb. 20 SEMCOG executive committee meeting.

Among members of that special committee will be Andrew Wardach and John La Belle of Livingston County; Nancy Dingledey (county commissioner), Jeddy Hood (West Bloomfield supervisor), Dante Lanzetta (Birmingham commissioner), and William Roberts (Walke Lake mayor) of Oakland County; and Elaine Kirchgatter (Canton treasurer) and Milton Mack (probate judge) of Wayne County.

Amberger was one of the corps of young managers groomed by Roman S. Gribbs, mayor of Detroit from 1969-72 and now a Court of Appeals judge living in the Northville area. Amberger earned two degrees from Wayne State University.

Glusac was Detroit corporation counsel and Amberger the mayor's executive assistant (after three years as superintendent of the Detroit House of Correction, the city's prison in Plymouth Township), when the pair took SEMCOG's top administrative slots in the



TIM RICHARD

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recession year of 1974.

"It was a touchy situation," Amberger recalled. "We drove to Lansing to pick up the payroll."

Mel Ravitz, retired Detroit councilman who chaired SEMCOG in 1970-72, added an anecdote. "The person who came to our rescue was Walker Cislser, the chairman of Detroit Edison. He put up a personal \$50,000 bond to help SEMCOG meet its payroll. Not a corporate loan but a personal one."

SEMCOG, itself now 30 years old, was the outgrowth of a 1964 Johnson-era federal highway law requiring metropolitan areas with a central city of 50,000 or more to engage in regional planning in order to receive highway aid.

In time, SEMCOG developed road, sewer, housing and other plans for the region of Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston, Washtenaw, St. Clair and Monroe counties.

More often than not, there was a tug of war between 1) black Detroiters and conservative suburbanites who mutually feared regional thinking and 2) the more aggressive regionalists who wanted SEMCOG to become an operating government with a population-based legislative body.

The group between these two camps, with Amberger and Glusac walking the tightrope above them, prevailed.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1881.

The state of the union: apathy

Looking out of my Washington hotel room, less than two hours before the president's annual report to the country, I thought to myself, what is the State of the Union? As I stared at the seat of our nation's government, it was being besieged by thousands of news reporters, representatives from The New York Times to the local paper in Paducah, Ky. All were here for one reason, and it was not to cover President Clinton's address to the nation, though the president was playing a large role in them being there.

Was there some financial crisis? Were we being threatened by some foreign foe? Maybe the fuss was over a new tax cut or an ingenious plan to better educate our children or cut crime? Wrong on all counts. The reporters were here to cover a growing scandal involving our nation's top politician. They were here to uncover a real story. Did the president obstruct justice in some way?

I am not going to engage in partisan politics and make rash judgments about our commander in chief. Everyone in this country is innocent until proven guilty, the president is no exception.

My concern lies in the attitude of the Union ... apathy. Whether true or not, the latest happenings in Washington will further reinforce the American peoples' attitude that all politicians are liars and no good son of a guns. They will refer to the term "honest politician" as an oxymoron.

As I looked out my window, I saw a group of young people, high schoolers, on a tour of the nation's Capitol and that is when it hit me. If this pattern of behavior by our political leaders continues, the apathy of the baby boomers will pale in comparison to the apathy of my generation, Generation X. My generation already has

GUEST COLUMNIST



ANDREW RACZKOWSKI

the lowest voter turnout of any age group in the country. The majority of young people don't care about politics or government, unless it gets in their way. That has got to change.

Tip O'Neill, the longtime speaker of the United States House of Representatives, once said, "People like to be asked and people like to be thanked." Some politicians are too proud to ask and too arrogant to thank. I am not. My request goes directly to my generation.

Please, do not forsake getting involved in politics or government. If you don't like the way things are done in Washington, Lansing, or your local community, work to change them. The first thing you should do is vote. Never let the polls close without gracing the doorway of your precinct voting location. Write your local, state, and national leaders. Call them on the telephone. Let them know exactly what you like and don't like about the job they are doing.

If you are not satisfied about the job they are doing or you don't feel like your voice is being heard, run for office. If you don't work change, you have no right to complain. Don't sit on the sidelines and complain about the State of the Union, do something to change it. Tip O'Neill was right ... I have asked you to get involved, now I want to thank you for getting involved.

Andrew Raczkowski is the 37th District state representative for Farmington and Farmington Hills. Reach him at 1-800-864-2108.

LETTERS

On managing time

Nothing in life is more important than the management of time.

How often have you heard someone say, "I would have done so-and-so, if I had the time?"

Time is a limited component of our lives and to be efficient must be managed well. This doesn't mean that your life plan cannot have a certain amount of flexibility. It does, however, require a certain amount of long-range planning that can be adjusted if circumstance requires you to make adjustments.

Everyone knows the amount of productive hours available to them and therefore, must adjust them according to projects and their priority. Perfection is not the goal; perfectly planned lives are few and far between, but some degree of order must be applied.

There is tremendous amount of satisfaction in knowing you have completed the tasks in your schedule. In any event, the old adage is still very true: Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

Ross Rhinehart
Livonia

Speech reeks of third-termism

The great thing about writing a weekly column is you get enough time and distance for reflection. God help those editorial writers and TV commentators who have to distill wisdom into sound bites just 30 seconds after a big speech ends!

I've now had the time to read and re-read Gov. John Engler's State of the State speech, delivered last Thursday. The more I reflect on it, the more troubling it becomes.

First, it's obviously a very political document, intended to get the best of both worlds in an election year but of virtually no use as a policy agenda.

To reassure his base of conservative voters, Engler wants to cut state income taxes by \$3 billion by 2005, require a 60 percent legislative vote to raise future taxes, lock up more felons in more new prisons for longer jail terms and require folks getting welfare checks to test free of drugs.

To reach out to moderates and independents, the governor wants to borrow \$500 million for environmental cleanup, test pupils at the end of third grade for reading proficiency, end social promotion from grade to grade in schools and offer state-subsidized health insurance for poor children.

Second, so characteristic of Engler the master schemer, it's very clever, especially on taxes.

Talking about tax cuts, even on a timetable so delayed that every current member of the Legislature will be term-limited out of office by the time the rates come down, guarantees good next-day headlines. And it forces challengers to play on Engler's time-tested battlefield of tax cuts.

Moreover, the salami tactic of cutting taxes year after year into the next century insures that less and less money will be available for government to spend for whatever purpose. Less money, less big government. And, as every conservative knows, less government is better government.

Third, the speech reeks of third-termism, the political malady that affects politicians when they decide to run for a third term in office.

A first symptom is the increasing delusion that the real world is defined by what goes on its capitals, whether Lansing or Washington, and not by the daily lives of ordinary people. I remember urging senior members of Blanchard's administration to spend at least one day a week doing staff outside Lansing. Well, Engler and his people have been around Lansing for a long time, and it's an open question in my mind whether they've lost their earlier perspective.



PHILIP POWER

Another symptom - quite evident in Engler's speech - is the tendency to try to be all things to all people. The last symptom is the worst. By diluting the focus, third-termism saps the will.

John Engler's speech was not a focused document. In offering something for everybody, it lost the sharpness and bite that have made the governor such a formidable political figure.

Eight years is a long time for any governor. You've used up most of the good ideas you came into office with, and your agenda keeps getting more and more diluted with each passing year. And year by year, you keep alienating folks until there are lots of people mad at you. Very often, the inevitable response is to try to be all things to all people.

I think John Engler is showing the symptoms of third-termism. If that's true, he'd better watch out, because eventually his opponent will sniff the illness out and exploit it.

The Allegro mess

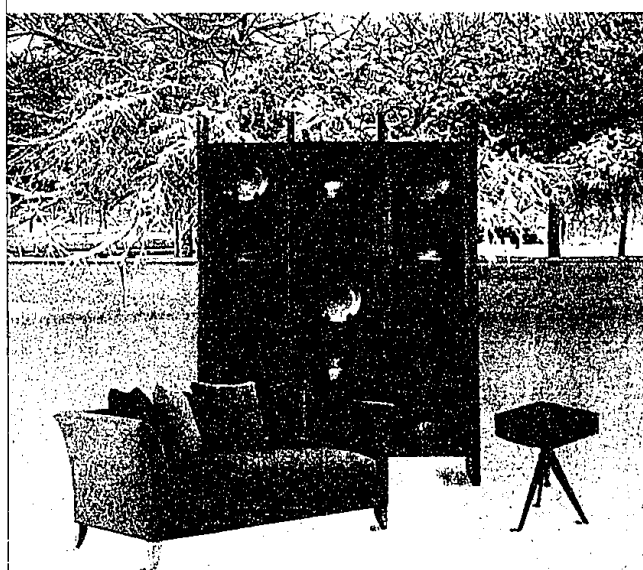
I feel obliged to follow up on the outpouring of response to my column on being detained for six hours inside an Allegro Airlines airplane sitting on the tarmac at Cincinnati International Airport.

Obviously, many, many people have suffered equally maddening experiences. If I were in the airline business, I'd start doing surveys of customer satisfaction.

There has been a concrete outcome to this whole mess. Chief Customs Officer John Shea has provoked a series of meetings among the various federal agencies with jurisdiction at airports. The new rule is that no airplane will be held for longer than two hours without allowing passengers to disembark, make phone calls and use the toilet. Thank you, Mr. Shea!

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@oeonline.com.

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