

POINTS OF VIEW

It's our obligation to explore the shades of gray

Take pity, I suggest, on the members of the Southeast Oakland Narcotics Intelligence Consortium (SONIC) and the police in Novi. Having just received approval from the Novi council to put a \$3.6 million upgrade of the police station on the November ballot, they then went and busted up a nickel-dime poker game in the clubhouse at the Maples of Novi golf course.

Turns out the malefactors, ranging in age from 55 to 80, have been playing their regular game for years without bothering anybody. But the cops got an anonymous complaint of gambling in a public place. So they turned up (in plain clothes) at the Maples clubhouse, ordered a couple of beers, observed the poker game, announced the bust in front of 80-odd members, took the players outside, noted their names and confiscated the chips.

"Nobody was arrested," said Novi Police Chief Doug Shaffer. "We'll simply gather the information and

present it to the prosecutors." As of this writing, the prosecutors have, well, folded.

Lee Elbert, one of the players, was fuming. "We've been playing poker there for probably five years. I understand they were investigating a complaint, but don't they have anything better to do?"

It's fun making the cops look silly when you run across a story like this. And certainly, there's no doubt the police could have handled things with greater tact and grace.

But there is another side to this story, one that introduces an uncomfortable shade of gray into something that looks black and white on the surface. It's a side that often gets overlooked in the big city media, especially when reporters and editors are getting their grins about a story.

There is a state law that says that no gambling shall take place in a public place unless it's licensed by the state. Moreover, there is another state law that says that any establish-



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ment that serves liquor may not allow criminal activity there, on pain of losing the liquor license. A complaint had made to the police that illegal gambling was going on. And by law, police departments are obliged to investigate complaints duly made.

The law is the law. And when police have the discretion of deciding which laws they will enforce and which they will ignore, we're all in trouble.

Lawmakers, of course, are seldom interested in this point when caught up in the frenzy of making laws. Novi

Police Chief Shaffer got it right when he said, "No one ever gave a police officer a list of laws they didn't want enforced."

The U.S. Congress, for example, got its grins in recent months by beating up on the Internal Revenue Service. Of course, there is considerable evidence the IRS has been overzealous (to put it mildly) in going after tax cheats. But few made the point that the tax laws are passed by the Congress, not the IRS, and that if anybody deserves the blame for our unbelievably complicated and confusing tax code it should be the Congress that created the code in the first place.

But the law is the law. And the poker players at the Maples were using chips, not cash, so the police were uncertain just what the stakes were. When they turned out to be nickel-and-dime, the cops were just as embarrassed as anybody.

And the police could have used more discretion, as Maples manager

Todd Gerhart pointed out. "Had an officer just said to me, 'Listen, I'm going to go finish my dinner and my beer, and when I walk out of here in five minutes I don't want to see any of that going on,' fine. It would have been done."

So where are we? Things are usually a little more complicated in real life than they seem in the newspaper.

And when you see a story that makes somebody look really silly, there's usually another side to it. It's the obligation of community newspapers like this one to explore that other side, because real life usually is painted in shades of gray.

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Follow the money: Pay attention to state education races

They say large minds discuss ideas, medium-sized minds discuss events, and small minds discuss personalities.

By that standard, Americans and the media serving them have teeny-weeny minds with their noses buried in Monica's wardrobe or snickering at Fieger's kicking foot.

Michigan voters have some major decisions to make on state education posts this year. It's not a matter of voting a straight ticket to "support" the gubernatorial candidate. These boards get their power from the Michigan Constitution, not a party platform or executive orders.

The two major parties will meet this weekend. Republicans in Grand Rapids and Democrats in Lansing, to nominate two candidates each for State Board of Education and the governing boards of the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University.

From experience, I will guess coverage will be poor. One Detroit paper has no Sunday edition, and the other has an early deadline. Detroit TV doesn't cover the conventions at all any more. Forget commercial radio.

What coverage you the voter will get will consist of the Republican coronation of Dick Posthumus as lieutenant governor and the Democratic standardbearer's lip-shooting jokes.

But let us follow Deep Throat's advice to Woodward and Bernstein and "follow the money": The state general fund budget is \$8 billion-plus; the three universities have combined budgets nearing \$4 billion.

State employment is in the 60,000 ballpark. The three universities have enrollments totaling more than 120,000 (counting U-M's Dearborn and Flint campuses).

That is a ton of money and a lot of young and emerging minds.

The State Board of Education has



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rule-making powers that many of its members don't grasp. The incumbent governor is striving mightily to steal its potential thunder and gut its powers. He knows how important that board is, even if the small minds of the voters and news directors are limited to what part of Engler's anatomy Fieger wants to kick.

So what are the issues:

■ Openness - Two of the university boards have been plagued by open meetings problems and document secrecy.

■ Tuition - Parents and self-supporting students can't understand the long history of tuition and fee hikes in excess of the federal consumer price index. One university has a tuition gimmick that gives the illusion of holding rates under the CPI - for any one graduating class - but few people see through it.

■ Bias - One university is prepared to fight all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to defend its "diversity" admissions standards that others consider anti-white and anti-Asian bias.

■ Expansion - One university is having major problems with its \$1 billion-plus hospital system. Another is hell-bent on expanding into academic areas justified by its yearnings for prestige more than the market's need.

■ Charter schools - Between them, the three major universities have chartered just one public school academy of the 100 or so. What is

their thinking?

Clearly these contests are far more important than who issues license plates. But you can guess what kind of coverage you'll get and what your friends will be gossiping about at lunch.

Into the breach is stepping the American Association of University Women's Livonia branch. AAUW is inviting all the candidates - yep, Libertarian, too - to answer the tough questions on Sept. 24. Can't make it? The four boards will be videotaped by the local cable company which will make it available statewide.

I'll cover it, and I expect student journalists from the Michigan Daily will, too. Watch for the official announcement, and be ready for the coverage.

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

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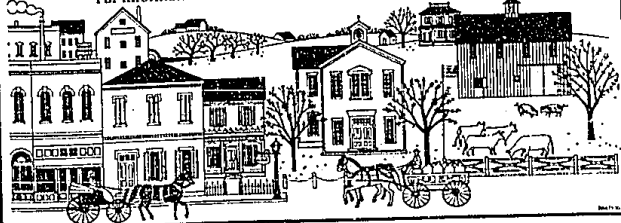
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Upcoming Events
Labor Day Round Up - Annual horse show, parade and juried art show. Games, face painting and fun for everyone. Parade starts at 12 noon, Monday, September 7.
Holly Day - a day long holiday celebration with activities for the whole family. Saturday, December 5

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