

POINTS OF VIEW

Advocates of anti-sprawl should take show on the road

It was truly a shame, I thought, when the Michigan chapter of the National Federation of Independent Business released survey results this month showing that the state's "Main Street business owners and family farmers reject the notion that state spending should be skewed to influence land use."

The survey, unveiled by NFIB Michigan Director Charles Owen, showed that two thirds of small business owners in Michigan object to the idea of directing state spending on roads, schools, utilities and other services away from outlying areas "in an attempt to restrict suburban growth." Only one in four supported the concept.

It's a shame because it is exactly those folks — Main Street business owners and family farmers — who lawmakers are trying to help most with their anti-sprawl initiatives.

Downtowns and small towns are among those most hurt right now by sprawl. When a new mall or strip center opens out on the interstate, it's usually the older established business centers



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that suffer the most. Reaping Main Streets is exactly what lawmakers are hoping to do.

Family farmers get hurt now by sprawl too. The big corporate farms will always be able to survive, but the family farmers are the ones who can barely make a profit when their land is taxed according to what it could be sold for if it were to be developed. Assessing land based on its value when used as farm land — rather than on its potential according to what it could be developed as — will allow family farmers, not the taxman, to determine how long they'll stay in agriculture and when to put the acreage on the market.

But here is the part that really stings. "Recently, there has been a growing temptation among state lawmakers to slip language dealing with these issues into budget bills," Owens said in unveiling

the survey results. It's a "back-door effort to rob Rural Peter to pay Urban Paul, all in the name of addressing our alleged 'urban sprawl' problem."

Ouch. State lawmakers aren't trying to hide their activities. They've been quite open about the ways in which they are trying to address sprawl.

There are dozens of initiatives aimed at dealing with sprawl spread out all over the place — legislation, a constitutional amendment, budget bills, administrative programs, committee research — and none of them carry a title with the word "sprawl" in it.

For example:

■ Gov. John Engler has proposed a constitutional amendment for the ballot this fall to set tax assessments on farms "at their agricultural use rather than on their 'highest and best use.'" Although it is intended to address sprawl by taking property tax pressure off farmers, sprawl is nowhere mentioned in the proposal.

■ Nor was it when the governor's brownfield redevelopment tax credits

went through.

■ It won't like be in the verbiage when the issue of purchasing development rights and moving them to brownfields is taken up later this year.

■ Yes, budget bills have been used. Rep. Patricia Godchaux (R-Birmingham) for instance included a program in her budget for the Michigan Economic Development Commission in which it would attempt to redirect development toward urban areas.

■ Rep. Gene DeRossett (R-Manchester) has a bill that would co-ordinate construction codes across the state. But it doesn't carry the sprawl label.

■ And DeRossett is the chair of a nine-member committee studying sprawl and ways to address it. But its title refers to land use, not to sprawl.

The reason is that the policies in place now that encourage and exacerbate sprawl, that actually spur growth further out in greenfield areas in an artificial manner, are also spread out all over the place.

Of course, when they were instituted

in the first place, we didn't have a debate that concluded we should encourage sprawl. But now that we want to curtail it, folks like Owen, I think legitimately, feel we should have a debate to determine whether reversing the process is what we want to do and what the best ways to do it are.

This is where DeRossett's committee could really do the state a favor. By taking its show on the road throughout the state and giving voice to all who have pro or con sentiments about the issue of sprawl, the committee could provide the forum the state needs on the overall issue of sprawl.

If that doesn't happen, some in Michigan will continue to feel that lawmakers snuck it by them. And that would indeed be a shame.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Better prepared

After attending the meeting on Wednesday, March 15, to preview the new component to my elementary school's curriculum, I was seriously tempted to submit a strong opinion in writing to the best source we have in Farmington to bring relevant issues before our community.

I was not tempted because I felt the need to disagree with the decisions some very dedicated people had made in the best interest of our children in order to comply with federal mandates. I was shocked and dismayed at the lack of parental interest regarding an issue that I was hopeful would be a concern to all parents in our community. I chose not to submit my concerns because I did not want to offend any of my dedicated parent friends with my obvious personal opinion.

I have since regretted my decision after reading a very one-sided article on the front page of Thursday's Farmington Observer and an inaccurate review of the material presented.

The opinion that a group of 50 Hillside parents were the only ones seemingly concerned about the video content of these lessons misrepresented the effort that has been made by our educators regarding this potentially controversial subject. Most of these 50 parents chose not to attend the new curriculum presentation, as did most of the parents in our district. Whether you agree with the curriculum con-

tent or not, the adult complacency about the issue of sexual harassment will be directly reflected in our children's views on the subject. There was far more to learn at this meeting than just the content of these two videos.

I believe that every family in the Farmington School District received notification from their school of the option of previewing the "Respecting Myself and Others: A Positive Approach for Sexual Harassment Prevention Education."

Being an admittedly over-protective parent, I was hoping for some enlightening discussion about how to help my young children and myself deal with this frightening but valid issue confronting every child in even our finest schools. Indeed the meeting was enlightening in many ways.

Approximately 12 parents chose to attend the preview. There were more of our dedicated educators and principals in attendance than parents. I was unaware prior to attending that my children's principal was the presenter. But after realizing he and many others have spent over three years of their time and attention trying to best serve the needs of our children, I was truly embarrassed with the lack of parental interest.

Instead of publicly addressing my concerns, I chose to personally acknowledge the efforts of our principal the following morning and to express my concerns to him. I was graciously invited to preview this

school year, the entire curriculum my child will be presented during next year. Seeing that I was a bit concerned about the content, he wisely suggested that I could get a head start on approaching any issues I might find sensitive to myself and my child and not feel pressured to address everything next spring.

At the curriculum presentation, I was able to preview both of the new video additions to the health curriculum as well as review the entire curriculum, in order to put these new additions in perspective. I found the first- and second-grade video to be tastefully done in a manner that would allow young children to use their personal experiences to interpret the level of "what-to-do" in an awkward situation. Although the concept of private parts was briefly addressed in regard to areas their bathing suit would cover, it was not the main issue being presented in the video.

A young boy was being threatened by a school bully who has ordered him not to tell. He then has a dream about this secret that includes a series of relevant issues in which he learns "what-to-do" from two funny little frogs. In the end he makes the choice to tell his "Uncle Bob" and gets the courage when he awakens to tell his mom, who will now help him to solve the problem. It is the adults — not an innocent child —

who view this video who will make the leap to inferred sexual abuse. If a child's lack of innocence regarding this area becomes apparent in first or second grade, it is surely an area where adult intervention would be warranted.

The fifth grade video was unsettling but also tastefully done. As a parent of younger children I found it difficult to imagine how I will address these in-depth issues of sexual harassment with my children in such a worldly way in a few years. I was able to share with our school social worker that what I wish to shelter my children from being exposed to and what I know is necessary and safer for them to know are not always the same thing. I was assured by one of our respected fourth-grade teachers that our reasoning that I will have all of the support I will need from them in order to approach all of these issues as my children grow up. I was far more interested in the teacher presentation of this curriculum than the 20-minute video that will be presented. Their daily lessons and opinions of our children's appropriate or inappropriate behavior will have a far greater effect on their future lives than a 20-minute video. If it helps one child to say no or to get the help they need, then it has served a useful purpose.

I hope these issues never hit too close to home but if my child has to help a friend someday they will be better prepared to handle it in an informed and sensitive manner.

I am afraid that the responsibility of these and many other sensitive issues has fallen on the shoulders of our educators whether I believe it is fair or not. If we as parents do not take advantage of the opportunities we are given to address our concerns, then we miss the chance to see the whole picture of what our valuable educators are trying to do in an increasingly apathetic environment. You may choose to shelter your child from this curriculum. You may arm yourself with the information to be covered and choose to use your child's daily events to present it as comfortably as you can. Or you may choose to let the educators of your children have enough knowledge to keep them safe. Whatever your choice, your children will learn from you how they will handle life's hurdles. Make sure the example that you set is the one you wish them to emulate.

Sharon Russell
Farmington

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