

Farmington Observer

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Hills police 'liquor stings' set important standard

Last month's "liquor sting" by the Farmington Hills police should not go unnoticed by the community.

The Hills police set the standard for the state in these efforts; this was the 27th time they have sent out undercover decoys in the stores and restaurants to see if the liquor license holders are following the law.

In the December sting, five Farmington Hills restaurants were caught selling to underage buyers, out of 49 visited. So, 44 establishments did what they were supposed to do, and refused to sell to the obviously young decoys.

Two of the cited restaurants - Steak and Ale and the Holiday Inn/Pompano on Ten Mile - are part of national companies, and their employees should clearly know better.

The value the liquor license has to the store or restaurant should make the license holder very cautious.

According to Mark Smith, director of enforcement for the Michigan Liquor Control Commission, enforcing the underage laws "are among the most important things we do."

Unfortunately, the LCC finds things around the state are not as good as in Farmington Hills. Smith said about 9,000 decoy visits a year are made by his enforcement people, and about one in three results in a violation.

State police, local police, and the LCC themselves all do stings. The LCC program started in March 1997.

"We all want the same thing," Smith said. "We want 100 percent of these places to pass."

The LCC does follow up failed stings with a letter telling those who pass and with the visit but not revealing dates and other details.

Both Smith, and Clifton Hardy, who runs the LCC enforcement efforts for southeast Michigan out of the commission's office at Grand River and Drake in Farmington Hills, want that three violations in a 24-month period can result in license suspension or revocation.

LCC hearings look at the violation and at the establishment's past record. The first violation brings a fine, the second a bigger fine, and the third, mandatory suspension or revocation.

The license holders have a whole series of rights to hearings and various appeals. In his 28 years with the LCC, Hardy has seen his share of revocations. "No one who gets (successfully) cited goes unpunished," he said.

The LCC Web site reports that their efforts alone found 929 violations in 1999. "However, the 1998-2000 totals are much lower than the 1,399 underage violation total from 1997. The Commission is committed to continuing this operation," the Internet site says.

Given the numbers, it would seem that three decoy visits per license holder would be extremely difficult to achieve, even with the LCC people, and local, county and state cops doing their part.

Also it would seem that the procedure and penalties are extremely liberal, given the seriousness of the offense - drunk driving is the leading cause of teen deaths in America.

That's why the Hills effort is so important.

Anyone who sells to minors without "due diligence" in checking ID, and is caught, deserves what they get. We have no sympathy for those cited and with their license being taken away.

Keep the "liquor stings." They are saving lives.

Airport contracts need a breath of fresh, open air

Michael Conway, director of external affairs for Wayne County Airports, said recently that the county would welcome a grand jury investigation into the handling of construction contracts at the airport.

He said charges leveled by John Wyke, a Southgate subcontractor, that the county paid an extra \$9 million to a contractor for lighting and signage, even though the project came in two years late are based on a misunderstanding of the facts. Wyke's call for a grand jury investigation is the latest in a number of complaints about how the county handles contracts for the airport. The complaints have led to an investigation of airport operations by the state legislature.

Conway counters Wyke's charges by saying the extra payment, over the original \$11 million bid, was to meet a Federal Aviation Administration deadline and to satisfy an FAA change in standards for signage. He also questions Wyke's contention that the extra costs were paid by taxpayers. He said airport construction is paid by funds raised from airlines and passengers. He also argues that there were no "irregularities" in the handling of the contract since it didn't require approval by the county commission.

Falling as it does after the other complaints about airport contracts and financing, Wyke's charges raise serious questions about the transparency of

what should be public business. While not questioning Conway's explanations, we do question why it will take a grand jury hearing to explain what should be public information.

If contracts involving millions of dollars of public money (whether raised through taxes or through fees which are quasi-taxes) are regularly engaged without legislative oversight, their license is well past time that the county commission take action to bring these contracts under their authority. (The commission a few days ago reorganized to create a committee that will deal with the airports exclusively.)

Any action has the advantage of speed, especially when dealing with building projects. But no government executive should be allowed to operate outside of legislative and public scrutiny. The company that formerly operated the airport parking lots subcontracted to Executive Ed McNamara's brother-in-law, raising the bright red flag of nepotism and creating an all-too-easy target for McNamara's critics. Legislative oversight might have prevented such an embarrassing situation.

Contracts involving more than routine funds should be publicly bid. Bids and large overruns should be approved by the county commission. All contracts should be open for public inspection.

We wouldn't need a grand jury if these processes had been followed all along.

GUEST OPINION

Community concert excellent

I attended Sunday's joint concert of the Farmington Community Band and the Birmingham Concert Band at Harrison High School. It was just plain excellent!

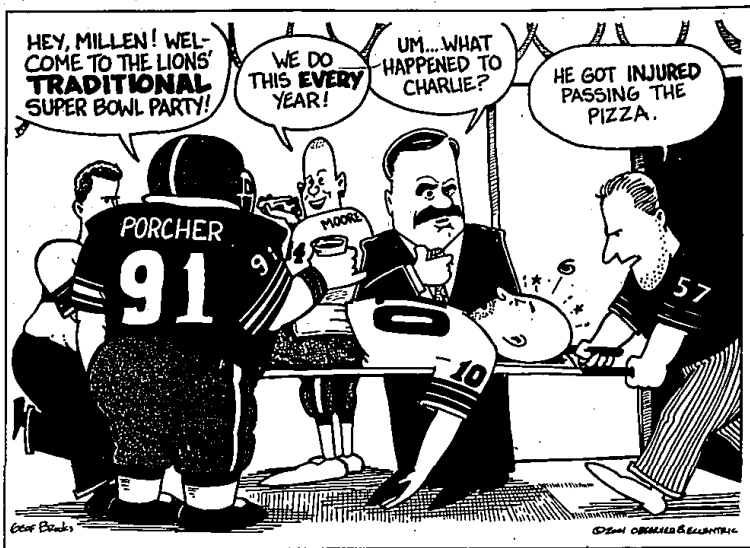
Each of these wonderful ensembles performed a wide range of selections exceptionally well. Everything from the traditional marches we expect from hands to concert pieces by Bach and Saint-Saens. And when these two great bands combined to perform under the direction of professor H.R. Reynolds of

U of M, the result was terrific - both in terms of the beauty of the music they created as well as the complexity of the pieces they performed.

We certainly are fortunate to have a community band of this outstanding caliber here in the Farmington area.

I am already looking forward to the rest of their performances this year.

Pat Semerjian
Farmington Hills



LETTERS

Wishes 'unheard'

The city of Farmington, a little town with only 10,000 population, has an abundance of empty commercial space which needs filling first before we start emptying out our residential homes and neighborhoods to accommodate business.

Having read your paper's articles with great interest, I would like to point out that the City of Farmington has been on the selling end of the rezoning. The assessor's office approached WhyUSA, my Grand River neighbor on our west side and my wife and I, the last family on Oakland Street and also the contiguous west side neighbor of the home being rezoned, to convince us, too, would be better to rezoned commercially to increase the value of our properties.

With this information in play, imagine the reception we received from the two boards considering the site plan and rezoning and finally, from the very salespeople themselves, with the exception of the courageous JoAnne McShane, the city council. All of these proponents of rezoning morphed themselves as impartial judges who would weigh our objections objectively and hand down fair and unbiased rulings on this project.

They began the council meeting by stating that they had decided on upholding their master plan which contained these proposed changes but would hear the neighbors on either side as a matter of courtesy, despite the fact that the "open hearing law" requires that all U.S. citizens present, may speak. Our arguments were dismissed as uninformed and misguided and our petition was ignored because the Mayor said it contained the names of six or seven people he knew that told him they signed because they wanted to please us. The wishes of the other 93 or 94 citizen petitioners of the historic district thereby went unheard.

We went to our government seeking justice. We brought the petition to show we were not alone. We thought this elected body would hear our concerns and change their paper plan in favor of living families and voters. We did not realize that they had no fear of voter concerns because, we have been told, they seem to be the only ones who wish to run for these offices. The same people rotate the mayor's job.

Hopefully, our new friends and ourselves will change this perception.

Jack and Sandra Felsot,
Farmington

Smell lingers

The Farmington City Council by approving the rezoning of 22432 Oakland Street assured that it will never again be a home but merely an old shell, housing a drapery business, bead shop, tattoo parlor or whatever else ends up there in the future.

They also assured that Jack Felsot's home next door will suffer the same fate.

The city effectively eliminated two families from the neighborhood.

It seems that the kids were greased on this decision in 1998 when the planning commission amended the city's master plan to allow for CBD zoning of these parcels which were determined to be undesirable as residences. Residents of the historic area, including my wife and myself, were unaware of the change and of the eventual consequences.

When application for the change was made to the historic committee it was approved in closed session apparently because no outward alteration of the building's appearance was proposed. When the zoning board was petitioned they approved because the master plan allowed the change and the historic committee did not object.

What has been lost in all of this is the fact that 97 percent of the historic district residents polled disapprove of the change. The only council member with the nerve to allow conscience to overcome expediency was JoAnne McShane. Mary Bush, the realtor, thinks that commercial development of our neighborhood will raise values, we disagree. James Mitchell merely classified the Salem Church's opposition as devious (his word was disingenuous) and dismissed the residents' petition as being signed by people who had originally supported the Orwellian "Master Plan" without checking signees names.

The council should be aware that the JC's aren't the only friends of Farmington. There are those of us who have expended thousands of dollars and untold hours of work to restore and improve our historic home. It is especially difficult for those of us who live on or near Grand River who deal with the noise, dirt and unregulated traffic. Our area is the soul of Farmington and for the city to determine that the two houses on Oakland Street do not deserve to be lived in and a part of it is unconscionable.

The case may have been closed on this issue, but the smell will linger on.

Bill Stringer
Farmington

Memorial Park

The Dec. 28 article on Memorial Park in Farmington Hills contained a significant factual error that requires some clarification.

The 3.2 acre parcel of land adjacent to Hopscotch House at 11 Mile and Middlebelt Road was a gift from Hospice of Michigan, not Angela Hospice, as had been reported. Hospice of Michigan donated the property for Memorial Park to the city of Farmington Hills in 1997.

Many people mistakenly assume that all hospices in Michigan are part of a single organization, or that all offer the same services. In fact, although Hospice of Michigan is by far the largest, there are more than 100 hospices in the state providing care to the terminally ill.

Farmington Hills Hopscotch House, which provides compassionate end-of-life care to its residents in a comfortable home-like setting, is one of 17 sites Hospice of Michigan operates throughout the state. Each day we provide comprehensive comfort care to more than 850 people and support to their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify this error.

Jan Grabinski
Corporate Director of Property
Management
Hospice of Michigan

Kids' letters

The Jan. 4 issue of the Farmington Observer included a series of letters from fourth-grade students at Beechview Elementary School. The let-

ters were the result of a writing assignment from their teacher, Scott Stautler.

Their letters all expressed concern about the safety of biking and walking in their neighborhoods.

The safety, and the opportunity for biking and walking in Farmington and Farmington Hills, has become a significant dilemma, and the students' concerns are representative of the entire community, children, youth and adults. Good and safe walking opportunities offer important benefits for recreation, health and fitness, and local travel.

The need for healthy fitness activities was emphasized recently in a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The prevalence of obesity in the United States continued to grow in 1999, representing a serious public health threat to millions of Americans, according to the CDC. Michigan occupies the lofty position of No. 3 among all 50 states for the prevalence of obesity. The CDC recommends that schools offer more physical education that encourages lifelong physical activity and urban policy makers should provide more opportunities for walking, biking, and other alternatives to cars.

In 1999 the Working Wheels Cycling Club proposed the formation of the Non-Motorized Advisory Committee in Farmington Hills. The NMAC model has been effectively used in many locations as a forum for community members to develop sound recommendations for improvements to walking and biking opportunities. The city manager has reviewed and discussed the specifics of the NMAC but has yet to develop a recommendation to be adopted by the city council.

The NMAC will provide an opportunity for students like the fourth graders at Beechview Elementary, and 11 community residents, to address concerns about the safety of walking and biking in Farmington Hills, and for the development of sound solutions for those concerns. The city council and city manager should form the NMAC immediately.

Fred Dore
Farmington Hills

Share your opinions

We welcome your letters to the editor. Please include your name, address and phone number for verification. We ask that your letters be 400 words or less. We may edit for clarity, space and content.

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