

Let's learn to live together whether it be city or burbs

The party's over. The ships have sailed away. Detroit celebrated its 300th birthday in fine style. Tall ships and long canoes, ceremonial reenactments and pulsating rhythm and blues declared that the industrial city on the bend of a river has come through all right.

Now comes the hard part.



Hugh Gallagher

A recent correspondence to one of our staffers suggests just how far we have to go. The writer made it very clear that she was "not a racist" and that "some of her best friends" were black. Of course, they were "intelligent, hard working, quiet" black people, unlike those other black people. You would think after all the ridicule such hedging has rightly endured over the years that no one could ever write a letter like that with a straight face. But, you might be surprised how many people express themselves this way.

The woman had no problem with Stevie Wonder performing, but why didn't they have a nice white person like Barbra Streisand performing, too? (Apparently the very-New York Streisand got her start at some Detroit clubs).

The woman had once lived in Detroit, but when it became unbearable, she had to move. And, after all, what had black people ever done for Detroit before 1960 anyway...

Hmm! Whenever the subject of race comes up, you are likely to be blitzed with anecdotal stories about racial confrontations, about once "beautiful neighborhoods" that had fallen to decline, about business districts that were once vibrant and are now boarded over. And, anecdotally, those stories are true. What is missing, of course, is a wider view of generations of poverty, social isolation, real estate manipulation, drug peddling in poor neighborhoods, education and job discrimination and on and on and on.

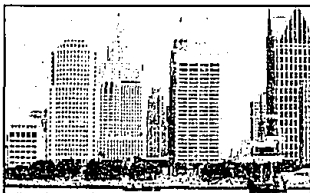
The usual response is, "Don't bother me with the facts, listen to my stories." And, no doubt, it's hard not to be sympathetic, especially to people who

eventually found themselves the isolated minority, finally pushed out by a rising crime rate and real estate speculators.

The Observer Newspapers don't cover the city of Detroit. We do cover entertainment and cultural venues in the city, because they draw the majority of their audiences from our communities. We did stories on Detroit 300 because it was really a celebration of the settling of the Detroit area, not just the city. But, our focus is on the local communities that we serve.

Still, we understand the importance of the central city to the future of our suburban communities, and we know that many of the people who now live in the suburbs, white and black, were once Detroiters.

We understand that the racial divide hasn't served our community well, either city or suburbs. We are also aware that we need to encour-



Majestic setting: The gleaming buildings of downtown Detroit were a fine backdrop for the tall ships during the celebration of the city's founding.

age diversity in our suburban communities. A good newspaper is a forum for ideas, a place where divergent views and contrasting stories might get a little closer to the ever-elusive truth. A good newspaper will also challenge simple assumptions or easy presumptions with both anecdotes and the broader view.

Now comes the hard part: learning to live together as a united metropolitan community working toward common goals. It won't be easy and it won't be as graceful as a schooner skimming across the river, but it is absolutely essential. Let the communication begin!

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Mike Malott

Proposal to break up phone company gains momentum

Didn't we just get done with a big statewide fight over local telephone services? Didn't our state lawmakers just wrap up a bill intended to rein in the telephone company and open the market to competition?

Didn't our typically pro-business governor get so ticked off with Ameritech that he favored a bill ordering mandatory rate cuts for customers?

The answer to all these questions is yes. And while you probably still have not seen any independent local telephone service providers pounding on your door offering to sell you a cheaper connection, you should get ready for another round of fighting on the phone front.

Expect it to get nastier, because the stakes this time are likely to be even higher.

Last week, the Michigan Alliance for Competitive Telecommunications issued a report called "Promises Made, Promises Broken: How Ameritech Took Advantage of Deregulation in Michigan during the 1990s."

The title pretty well says it all. MIACT accuses Ameritech of cutting staffing, curtailing investment in telephone infrastructure and allowing service problems to soar while all the time taking sizable profits. From 1995 to 1999, Ameritech's "return on equity" exceeded 44 percent, double what local telephone providers elsewhere in the country typically made.

Ameritech, of course, has denied the accusations. It has contended staffing remains pretty much as it has always been, the employees are just counted differently today. Investment, Ameritech says, is going up.

The company acknowledges it had service problems last year but has a plan in place to reduce the backlog and has made progress. Ameritech has also argued it should be allowed to enter the long distance service market, and it has already made an application to the Federal Communications Commission for permission to do so. Ameritech has also gone to court to block implementation of last year's law and has had some success in doing so. The courts have overruled the state legislature's decision to order the companies to stop collecting a \$3.28-per-month end-user line charge.

Nonetheless, MIACT is now frustrated with the slow pace of opening the local phone market to competition. It is frustrated to the point that it is now calling on the Legislature to order up "structural separation" of Ameritech.

That was the main recommendation in its "Promises Made, Promises Broken" report. Not unlike the break up of AT&T ordered by the feds in 1984, "structural separation" would force Ameritech to sell off pieces of its system, in essence, breaking the company within Michigan into smaller companies.

MIACT suggests Michigan lawmakers draw a chapter from its own deregulation scheme for electric utilities, which calls for a separation of the delivery system from the sellers of the service. As it would apply to telephones, one company would own the lines and would then sell services to all companies that want to retail local phone services to individual customers. That would put Ameritech's sales operation, the reasoning goes, on an even keel with competitive local phone service providers.

A similar plan has already been introduced to the state Legislature, but frankly it has yet to get much interest. State Reps. Mickey Mortimer, R-Horton; Andrew Neumann, D-Alpena; and Robert Gosselin, R-Troy, introduced House Bill 4764 in May. That bill would force both Ameritech and Verizon - formerly GTE and Michigan's second-largest phone company - to break into "wholesale" and "retail" operations. The bill still rests untouched in the House Energy and Technology Committee.

But the need for consideration may be self-evident. While lawmakers have tried to open the market to competition, little has come of their effort. Today, Ameritech still has more than 5 million phone lines in Michigan, 78 percent of the total and 96 percent of the lines in its coverage areas. Verizon has 100 percent of the lines in its coverage areas in Michigan.

Last year, customers were outraged when phone repairs and installations were taking up to four months to complete. And the state has had to launch into its own program, LinkMichigan, to bring high speed data lines to the state because Ameritech's DSL program is taking so long.

Meantime, Ameritech's primary emphasis seems to be expanding into the lucrative long distance market.

Mike Malott reports on the local implications of state and regional events. He can be reached by phone at (810) 227-0171 or by e-mail at mmalott@homecomm.net

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