

## THE WEEK AHEAD

### MONDAY

**Meeting:** Four subcommittees studying the pros and cons of delaying high school start times based on adolescent sleep time research will meet as a whole group at 7 p.m. Monday, Feb. 4 at the Farmington Training Center, 33000 Thomas Street. It is open to the public. The committees are transportation, learning and instruction, extra-curricular activities and community outreach. The FTC is located one block north of Grand River.

### TUESDAY

**Green thumbs:** Kids in second through fifth grades can learn about gardening 4:30-5:30 p.m. on the first and third Tuesdays of the month at the Farmington Library. Call (248) 474-4608.

### WEDNESDAY

**Public welcome:** The Governor Warner Mansion in downtown Farmington is open to the public 1-5 p.m. every Wednesday and first Sunday of the month. Group visits by special arrangement. Adult admission is \$2. Children 12 and younger are admitted free when accompanied by an adult.

**Storytime:** Dee and Becky (and sometimes Kathy) read classics and favorites at 10 a.m. every Wednesday at Borders.

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The future: Judy Downey of the Farmington DDA holds an artist's rendering of the proposed pavilion in the downtown Farmington Center. The hope is that development of vacant properties in the downtown will follow.

## Commercial development can lower taxes, improve lifestyles

BY DOUG FUNKE  
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The next time you complain about commercial development encroaching on your residential lifestyle, ask yourself a few questions.

How high would your property taxes skyrocket or how low would your municipal/public school services sink if not for retail, office or industrial tax contributions?

How far would you have to go to shop, enjoy a restaurant or see a movie on the big screen?

Where would you work to support body and soul, and where would your teen find that first job?

It's human nature to gripe about traffic congestion, noise, air and visual pollution plus a changing landscape that sometimes accompany commercial development.

But consider this.

Last year, non-residential properties accounted for 61 percent of Southfield's tax base of \$3.1 billion, 60 percent of Troy's \$4.7 billion, 40 percent of Livonia's \$4.1 billion and 35 percent of Westland's \$1.7 billion. Even in Birmingham, generally regarded as a great place to live with a quaint downtown, commercial accounted for 22 percent of the property tax base.

Couple that with non-homesteaded property owners usually paying at a higher tax rate and commercial has quite

an economic impact. One that eludes a lot of people, assessors say.

"I think probably the average resident doesn't think about it," said Sherron Schultz, Livonia assessor. "They're not thinking in a store, 'If this store weren't here, my taxes would be higher.'"

But it's true, said Barry Simon, Southfield assessor. "If they (homeowners) want to maintain the same services, they would have to pay more taxes if commercial were less," he said.

### Hometown pride

Specialty shopping and dining opportunities help establish a point-of-hometown pride for municipalities, especially those that try to build a local economy around special events.

The employment factor also can loom large when analyzing commercial development.

Some 78,820 permanent jobs were reported in Farmington Hills, 29,460 in Rochester Hills and 26,880 in Canton during 2000, according to most recent figures provided by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, a planning and data tracking service.

So how are commercial real estate markets doing here? Several experts gave their regional spin during a recent

Please see COMMERCIAL, A5

## Business mix keeps service up, taxes down

BY PAUL R. PACE  
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A "bedroom community" sounds nice, said Farmington Hills Mayor Nancy Bates, but the way to keep property taxes reasonable for homeowners and provide quality service is to allow commercial development to ease the tax burden.

Businesses pay more in taxes and demand fewer services than residential properties, creating a positive impact on taxes.

It was determined 28 years ago when we became a city that we'd have 65 percent of development devoted to residents and 35 percent to commercial.

That ratio has stayed close to its margins ever since, she said.

The city has also tried to keep costs down by keeping staffing levels low - 391 employees - while some cities

with comparable populations employ more workers: 679 in Southfield; and 832 in Pontiac, Bates said.

"Our tax rate is the sixth lowest in the county," she said.

As far as mixing commercial with residential, it's a fine line that takes planning and communication.

"We have a master plan," the mayor said. "We look at zoning and it's nothing we do quickly. It requires a lot of thought and care."

"We have public hearings about zoning changes or plans. It's a carefully thought-out process," Bates said. "I think we're on track."

The bottom line, she said:

"We offer good services at a reasonable cost to the tax-

Please see MIX, A5

## School officials talk budget

BY SUE BUCK  
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While Farmington School District faces a multi-million dollar budget deficit this year, Superintendent Bob Maxfield would like to save several

programs from the chopping block.

Block scheduling, support of team teaching at the middle schools, and the early elementary literacy program will be among his priorities as officials begin the process of trimming as much as \$5 million.

"There are fundamental reform things that I think this district is committed to," Maxfield said, adding officials will also stress preserving class sizes.

Block scheduling allows high school students to take seven classes, which gives them the opportunity to choose more electives and explore new classes.

While the news may seem dire, officials also describe their draft budget cuts as "talking points" and "talking documents" or a "work in progress." And they stress other school districts are in the same dilemma.

"Character is defined by how one handles adversity," said Gary Sharp, chairman of the school finance committee Tuesday. "Throughout this entire process the district's character has been shining. What really needs to be stressed to the public is that nothing is concrete, nothing is set in stone. We're not closing buildings. We are not cutting entire programs out. That needs to be stressed both here and in the media. This is an ongoing process which has just begun. We don't want to create or cause panic."

Increasing student/teacher ratios from 22:1 to 23:1 has been proposed. That would likely be accompanied by cuts in positions higher up the ladder.

"We can't reduce classroom teachers without reducing administration," Maxfield said.

### Trimming positions

He said last year three positions were reduced in the central administration office: the unfilled position of Jim Myers, executive director of K-12 student services, who became Dunkel Middle School principal; a school/community relations specialist aide; and a budgeted accounting supervisor position, which was never filled.

This year, Maxfield is "clueless" about where to find four administrative positions that have been included in the proposed cuts.

He doesn't think the district will offer buyout packages, the way Plymouth-Canton school district has. There, nine administrators accepted the offer, including principals, assistant principals and others.

Some employees might be in the market for such an offer, although Maxfield said the district would have to lose them.

"We have people who are near retirement who are doing a great job," he said.

Please see BUDGET, A2

## Winter storm brings the expected troubles

BY PAUL R. PACE  
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A Wednesday evening winter storm that dumped nearly seven inches of snow made roadways a struggle for motorists in the Farmington/Farmington Hills area.

In the Hills, the department of public works crews put all 27 vehicles to use to help clear up the streets. Crews managed to clear the major roadways first and started working on clearing side streets by afternoon.

Fortunately, traffic was light most of the day, noted Tom Blasell, director of public works.

But when duty calls, even the engineers, inspectors and mechanics

in the department help out by jumping into the vehicles, Blasell said.

The department did get complaints from residents by afternoon, but Blasell said they were the most commonly reported problems in all winter storms - people don't like having to clear the edge of their driveways after plows push snow back into them.

Most people understand, he said, why it has to be done.

"The best advice we can give is try and clear it before it hardens," he said.

According to Farmington and Farmington Hills police departments, the storm didn't result in any major traffic accidents.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL DREZLER

### Sharing the pain:

Lakeway Street next-door neighbors Chuck Wood and Helen Stulock work together on clearing snow from their driveways and walks. The snow and ice mix this past week caused its share of havoc but perhaps brought people together.