

# Research Council making life better in Michigan

With the dust is still settling on Tuesday's primary election results, now is a good time to take a look at one of the largely unknown factors that drove much of the political discussion in Michigan over the past year. It's called the Citizens Research Council. It's very small — offices in Livonia and Lansing and only eight highly qualified staff members. But it's very highly respected in Michigan and nationally. And over the years, CRC has influenced the evolution of public policy in Michigan far out of proportion to its size.

For example, if there was any real substance in the debates between candidates in the gubernatorial primary election, it had to do with Michigan's budget crisis. Guess what provoked the whole discussion? In June, 2001, CRC issued a report — Michigan's Precarious Budget Situation — that concluded that the budget crisis was real and that there is a "structural deficit" approaching \$1 billion in the state's budget that will last for years unless something dramatic is done.

Before the CRC study was released, if you listened hard you could hear soft mutterings from Lansing that the state was facing budget trouble. But there was nothing specific, and certainly nothing suggesting that the budget crisis was as severe or as long lasting as it now seems.

By itself, publication of the CRC study provoked news stories and editorials from newspapers all over Michigan. And once the press got onto the story, it wasn't long before politicians were getting asked all kinds of difficult questions. And the Michigan budget crisis is now receiving the attention it deserves.

That's a perfect example of the CRC's mission: "In a world filled with all kinds of special interest groups, it can be difficult to sort out the facts required for sound decision making in government... The Citizens Research Council was founded in 1916 to answer a need — the need for independent, nonpartisan public policy research. Other organizations conduct public policy research but often have political agendas or clients that may compromise their objectivity or independence. The Citizens Research Council stands alone — always impartial and independent."

And the record of achievement is impressive.

Work done by the CRC paved the way for charter government for Wayne County in 1981, for improving school financing, for legislation providing for revenue sharing between state and local governments, for updated highway administration and finance, for funding community health organizations.

In fact, there are few big topics in Michigan public policy that have not been addressed in the Council's publications, CRC Reports, CRC Memoranda and CRC Notes. Of course, trying to provide research that makes complex material accessible to the general public yet meets the most stringent academic standards is not easy. As CRC President Earl Ryan told me, "We know a lot of stuff, but often policy makers don't know or don't care or prefer not to pay much attention to our research." But CRC remains firm in its belief that some information is better than none. As legendary University of Michigan Business Professor Paul McCracken says, "CRC is the only organization in Michigan with the competency, tenacity and credibility to get the job right."

The Council has undergone considerable evolution since its inception in 1916, when the Progressive movement introduced the then-revolutionary idea that public policy formation should be based on facts and empirical, independent research.

In the 1950s, according to Ryan, CRC was "determinedly boring, its publications and research nearly indistinguishable." But the organization moved out of downtown Detroit to a bright, modern office overlooking I-275 in Livonia and spiffed up the writing and design of its publications.

With an annual budget of around \$700,000, the Council is supported mainly by contributions from the business community around the state.

In order to further safeguard its independence, CRC is now trying to raise \$10 million as an endowment.

And it's just put up a web site — <http://www.crcmich.org> — that is now getting something like 60,000 hits a month.

The point here is that the Citizens Research Council is hardly the subject of daily conversation in Michigan.

But it is one of those quiet organizations that are uniquely valuable and filled with integrity that make life so much better for all of us.

Phil Power is the Chairman of the Board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2206 or at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net).

## Festival flounders

Again this year, we have witnessed the annual squandering of time and money that is the Farmington Founders Festival.

There has been much talk about improvement, about bringing the Festival around to its rightful purpose, which is to boost downtown businesses and make Farmington a destination of choice for locals as well as non-residents year round. By all accounts, neither has happened.

Talk to anyone who has attended in recent years and you usually get similar responses. The same local people go to look at the same things mostly because it's something to do on a hot summer weekend, and you generally can't help but drive by it.

Also, look at the choice for this year's parade "grand marshal." A loser from a "reality" show on television, this year's choice was picked — why? Because at one point in his life, he attended high school in Farmington Hills. Some criteria. It only points up the increasing desperation on the part of the festival board in their attempts to flog a dead horse.

The current occupants of the board have little or no experience in successful promotion on a large scale, and in fact many are simply local business owners with some extra time on their hands. This is no way to run a serious enterprise.

You can change the name, you can change the management, but the reality is still this: unless and until this event is infused with some new vision, and run by professionals with the knowledge and where-with-all to do ALL that is necessary, this festival is doomed to stay as it is — a silly excuse for a real event, and an apple-polishing junket for local political bureaucrats.

Scott Stevenson  
Farmington

## Education solutions

A recent discussion about vouchers in the Farmington Observer was interesting.

Phil Power commented about the British government's takeover of Oxford University. In an attempt to assist less wealthy families, the government began awarding scholarships and "British families and Oxford colleges, liking the government paying for kids to go to Oxford, acquiesced in what amounted to a governmental takeover of their higher education system."

He concludes with a valid warning by stating that "the way to government control often starts in what seems to be innocent acceptance of government money."

Others readers wrote letters attacking vouchers from different angles (discriminatory, public funds should go to public schools).

I agree... vouchers are not a good idea. However, it's interesting to note that Mr. Power does not dispute that the British government's policies (tuition caps, enrollment limits, scholarship regulations), designed to "to increase the number of poor kids enrolled", have led to the "deterioration of the Oxford degree."

If government involvement in higher education can be so counter-productive, as shown in this

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Oxford example, why do we feel the situation is different for K-12? Classical liberal economists (e.g. Adam Smith) have argued for centuries that government intervention in the free market produce damaging distortions.

Oxford is a demonstration of what happens when government, by force, tries to "improve" the guidance of the free market's invisible hand. K-12 education in Michigan, however, is supposedly exempt from the timeless truths of economics and human nature?

No, increasing costs and sinking standards will always be the inevitable consequence of government involvement in education, no matter how virtuous and intelligent the administrators. Unfortunately, these unintended consequences usually provoke additional government adjustments, and vouchers are a good example of such a "tweak."

We're getting wrapped around the axle trying to use government to solve problems we allowed the government to create. It's time to face the hard facts that we are going in the wrong direction. The solution to our education problems is liberty.

Jerry Smith  
Farmington

## Time for vouchers

It took 12 lawsuit-filled years but the U.S. Supreme Court declared that properly constructed voucher programs do not violate the First Amendment of the Constitution. The major weapon of the public education bureaucracy has been silenced.

Since the Milwaukee voucher program of 1990 and the Cleveland voucher program of 1996, there have been frequent actions in state and federal courts to ban these programs, largely on the spurious "separation of church and state" claim.

The Court is saying that the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." is not violated by a voucher to a student whose parents have freely chosen to send them to non-public school or to home school them.

This is a major affirmation of the transcendent right of parents to control the education of the children. Parents are the first teachers of their children and have always been so. The United Nations, in its 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" concurred "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education given to their children."

This ruling will accelerate the tempo of parental control initiatives like charter schools and home schooling.

While this decision will indeed have national impact, there are unique hurdles to be faced in Michigan. Our state has the most religiously bigoted Constitutions in the U.S. Progress will be slow but the school choice advocates are energized. The question is not "Is it legal?" but "Is the national trend to parental choice something our state should allow?"

We think it is time for the legislators and voters to look at the 1970 amendment in view of this current Supreme Court decision.

Roy Trevisan  
Farmington

E-mail your letters, news stories, photos and news tips to [jhubred@oe.homecomm.net](mailto:jhubred@oe.homecomm.net)

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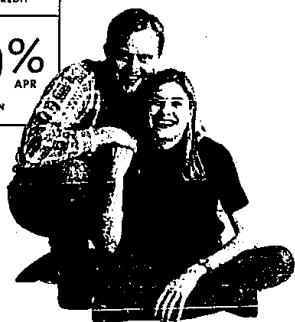
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