

Consolidating elections seems right thing to do

Turns out they had school elections last Monday. School board candidates were elected and defeated, millage and bond issues were resolved and our major election was the control of education ground on its state way. Only problem was almost nobody voted. Statewide turnout statewide was less than 5 percent, with some districts notching less than 1 percent. Historically, these numbers are not unusual for education elections.

In response, Secretary of State Terri Lund, Rep. Chris Ward (R-Brighton) and Sen. Beverly Hamerstrom (R-Temperance) have renewed long-stalled efforts to consolidate elections in Michigan. If their nine-bill package makes it into law, elections could be held only on the fourth Tuesday in February and on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May, August and November. Rep. Ward is a former township clerk, so he knows what he's talking about when he speaks about the "frustration" of voters not knowing when elections will be held.

Their arguments are relatively straightforward. Consolidating elections onto certain dates overall saves money. Michigan has 555 K-12 school districts and 57 intermediate (county-wide) districts. They produce a lot of elections, on the average 600 per year. Around the state, and even just in the state, it's expensive. It costs the city of Farmington Hills, for instance, \$30,000 to run a school election.

Moreover, concentrating education elections into certain specified dates reduces voter confusion and apathy and, hopefully, increases turnout. Shrewd school folks — board members, superintendents, principals, PTOs, teacher unions, whatever — have more than once conspired to schedule elections at times when a low turnout makes it possible for a dedicated minority to pass things like bond issues. More than once, I've heard a school superintendent argue, "We certainly don't want all those people voting in our election!"

So on the surface, consolidating elections into specified dates seems like a no-brainer. Who can possibly argue against something that brings wider democratic participation? But before the Legislature lurches into action, I'd like to add a couple of thoughts.

First, be careful about November. Our November ballot in Michigan is what the political scientists call a "bed sheet ballot," which means the number of races and propositions on the ballot makes the ballot as long as a bed sheet. President, U.S. Senate and House; governor, state senate and house; local mayors and city councils; judges; be they local or statewide; and various state and local propositions.

With all this stuff on the November ballot, it's easy for school matters to get lost in the shuffle.

Worse, voters are not going to get a lot of news coverage and our major publication in November elections. Responsible home town newspapers such as this one spend a lot of time covering all kinds of races and interviewing all the various local candidates. But time is not endless and space in the newspaper is limited. Adding school elections to the already-crowded November ballot can only worsen the crunch of trying to provide solid coverage for important local races.

A better alternative would be to lump together all education races into one single election. Voters could select members of local school boards, community college boards and governing board members of U-M, MSU and WSU. Confronted with an entire election dealing with matters educational, the voters would actually be obliged to cover the races, to question candidates, evaluate qualifications and question policy and positions. "Name" candidates would get less of a leg up. Citizens would have a chance to think about the totality of education policy and practice in Michigan — the biggest single item in the state's budget.

Secondly, this is exactly what we did in Michigan prior to the adoption of the 1963 constitution. Back then, education races were clustered into one spring election held in odd-numbered years. I've never understood why the constitutional convention overturned such a sensible system.

My second thoughts about consolidating elections are, regrettably, "mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive," as my old philosophy tutor used to say. Sure, doing something to increase voter turnout is as American as apple pie. High turnout is the best way to prevent a small, highly-motivated minority from dominating public policy, whether that minority is members of the teacher unions pushing for more money to go into schools or right-wing bigots trying to sabotage education policy.

But the obvious follow-up question is: In a higher turnout election, what kind of voter is likely to be turned out? Do we really want people who have no interest or knowledge in education to be voting in droves? What kind of voting decision is the marginal (and likely uninformed) voter likely to make? In other words, this increased voter participation actually likely to improve our democracy? This is a problem that has been debated for, literally, centuries. And I have to confess that as I get older and grumpier, I'm beginning to think that mere democratic participation is not necessarily the best solution for all of our social and political ills.

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) 953-2047 or at ppower@homecomm.net.

Health insurance changes helped balance the Oakland County budget

During this time of economic uncertainty, it is important for county leadership to practice fiscal responsibility.

As we grapple with the many decisions and issues facing our county, we are considering various alternatives. One of the major issues the Oakland County Board of Commissioners recently addressed was health care coverage for the over 3,500 county employees.

The national trend is that both health care and pharmaceutical costs have been skyrocketing.

This information is easily accessible through the substantial number of reports in the print media and television broadcasts.

We are all affected by this rapid increase and do not take this issue lightly. Within Oakland County, health care costs rose 33 percent last year. In an attempt to arrive at a compromise, we researched the trends and overall benefits provided to county employees.

We met this challenge with the duty to maintain comparable health care coverage while being mindful of budget constraints. Under the law, deficit conditions for the county must be corrected and budgets must be balanced.

The adjustment to health care was one component of the budget shortfall elimination plan. Our final decision reflects employee contributions that are similar to those of other public and private employers.

Though amounts vary by plan service provider, employees will now pay approximately \$30 biweekly for family coverage. Rates are lower for one or two people insured.

This alternative was also selected because it provides savings to be realized for multiple years, instead of a one time reduction.

These plan modifications will generate

I believe that we found a fair and balanced approach demonstrating concern for all county taxpayers. Preventative measures such as these help to avoid other means to cut costs such as fewer fringe benefits or downsizing.

\$1.6 to \$2.2 million annually to offset the budget shortfall. By using the generic or formulary brand name prescriptions, employees pay a reduced fee. Generic prescriptions are Tier 1 and the co-payment is \$5. Tier 2 Brand Name, Formulary prescriptions have a co-payment of \$10 while the Tier 3 Brand Name, Non-Formulary co-payment is \$25.

For retirees, the Tier 3 co-payment is set at \$15. The three-tier prescription plan is designed to provide flexibility for employees while offsetting the cost increases in this area.

Prior to these changes, county employees paid nothing for their health care insurance. Now, all county employees must contribute to put some money in the pot to continue to receive good quality health care coverage.

All of these efforts serve to help us continue to run our government. I believe that we found a fair and balanced approach demonstrating concern for all county taxpayers.

Preventative measures such as these help to avoid other means to cut costs such as fewer fringe benefits or downsizing.

As your elected official, I am committed to addressing issues with our values in mind and a desire to make a difference.

Mike Rogers is an Oakland County Commissioner representing the 14th District, which includes portions of Farmington and Farmington Hills.

Find new decorating ideas each Thursday in At Home



PHONAK • PRIVATE LABELS • INTERION • UNITRON • WIDEX

•SAVE DOLLARS ON HEARING AID BATTERIES FOR•

WHY PAY \$4,000, \$5,000, UP TO \$7,000 OR MORE FOR A SET OF HEARING AIDS WITH A WARRANTY OF ONLY 1 TO 3 YEARS, WHEN YOU CAN PURCHASE A 100% DIGITAL SET WITH A 5 YEAR FACTORY WARRANTY FOR LESS MONEY? — PLUS, A 5 YEAR SUPPLY OF BATTERIES!

UNBELIEVABLE DIGITAL PRICE! NOW ONLY

\$1688

Our Price

Now you see it

Now you don't

Complete - In - canal

AVAILABLE • NATIONAL BRANDS, INTERTON

• SIEMENS • PHONAK • WIDEX • OTICON • STARKY

• REXTON • ELECTONE • COMPARE SERVICE, QUALITY & PRICE

100% Digital Integra D Custom Complete In Canal

Come In & Listen How Great Our 100% Digital Aids Sound

Manufacturer's Suggested Price.....\$3412 per aid Expires 6-20-03

COUPON

DIGITALLY PROGRAMMABLE CUSTOM I.T.E.

\$798

Exp. 6-27-03 Factory List Price \$1405

COUPON

RECEIVE A FREE HEARING EVALUATION AND A FREE VIDEO EAR INSPECTION FOR EAR WAX!

Exp. 6-27-03

COUPON

HEARING AID REPAIRS NOT DIGITAL-PROGRAMMABLE OR BEHIND-THE-EAR

\$89⁹⁵

PLUS \$4H Exp. 6-27-03

COUPON

HEARING AID BATTERIES WHY PAY \$4M TO \$7.0M A PACK? • LIMIT 5 PACKS OF 4 BATTERIES

\$2⁰⁰

#10, #13, #312, #675 Exp. 6-27-03 Cash & Carry Only

GEORGE IWANOW HEARING AID CENTERS, INC.

OUTSTANDING SERVICE AND INTEGRITY SINCE 1954 FAMILY OWNED & OPERATED • IN PRACTICE FOR 49 YEARS!

We are providers for Blue Cross & Blue Shield Medical, and most insurances

PLEASE CALL FOR APPOINTMENT THANK YOU

LIVONIA

10988 MIDDLEBELT

(734) 261-6300

BLOOMFIELD HILLS

53 WEST LONG LAKE ROAD

(734) 261-6300

EASTPOINTE

21261 KELLY ROAD

(586) 772-1700

RIVERVIEW

17098 FORT STREET

(734) 285-5666

COME IN AND LET'S GET ACQUAINTED

BELTONE • MIRACLE EAR • SIEMENS • STAPKEY • ARGOSY