



OBSERVATION POINT

Food Prices And Shopping Centers: Is Suburban Development Worth It?

By Philip H. Power
Publisher

The worst cut of all was that just after some helpful fella in the U.S. Agriculture Department advised us all that fish was a cheaper source of protein than meat, the government turned around and devalued the dollar. Since something like 70 per cent of all the fish eaten in this country is imported, devaluation means that fish will go up by around 10 per cent in the next week or so.

Maybe those college kids down in Oklahoma who got so much ink last week with their anti-inflationary dog food diet are on to something. I remember in my youth having an occasional shopping match with old Boy out there in the back yard after the dish was put down, and if memory serves, kibble biscuits aren't all bad.

There are other ways of beating the skyrocketing cost of food. A lot of folks I know here who have big lots are deep in the middle of planning a nice vegetable garden this summer. Seeds are on order; prebending exercises are under way; the county agricultural extension agent's phone is constantly busy.

There are only two catches to the home garden strategy. The first is bugs and cutworms, but Nancy Richard (wife of our News Editor Tim Richard), who has plenty of experience in this area, assures me that it's just a matter of constant vigilance and effort.

The second is that if you're seen at the business end of a shovel, wearing denim overalls with a red bandana in your

pocket and a basket of fresh vegetables in your kitchen, you're likely to get a rock through your plate glass window, courtesy of the millions of housewives who are even more anti-farmer these days than they are anti-busing.

FARMERS ARE in trouble in more ways than one. Not only are they (somewhat unfairly) being blamed for the rise in food costs, but also they are literally being pushed off their land by rising taxes.

Land that is worth, say, \$650 an acre for farming is worth a whole lot more to a developer who wants to put up a shopping center or a subdivision. As the suburbs pushed increasingly into the farming areas, land values started to jump... and so did property taxes.

For a time the farmers fought back by using their clout with township assessors to rig their assessments, but in time the liberals got sore at such inequity (not to mention the folks who bought a home in a new sub and discovered that their land was being assessed at about double the rate of the farmer across the next mile road).

So assessments were equalized, which was just but which also raised property taxes so high that farmers found they simply couldn't keep up. So they sold their land to developers.

At present, Wayne County has only 13 per cent of its land left in farms, and Oakland County isn't much better with 18 per cent. The helpful folks at the Southeast Michigan Council of Govern-

ments have released a study showing that after awhile there simply won't be any farm land to speak of in Wayne and Oakland counties.

IN RESPONSE to this, officials in the Michigan Department of Agriculture have started firing off press releases suggesting that all farm land will be gone from southeastern Michigan by the year 2000 and that this will produce severe food shortages and change our diets.

This is, of course, nonsense. In an age of rapid mass transport, food is shipped around the country much like automobiles, and except in very general terms a shortage of farm land in southeastern Michigan isn't likely to do much more than inflation has already done to our diets.

But there is a point to the concern.

Part of it has to do with a feeling that our society has gone too far, too fast with development, that our suburbs are in serious danger of becoming nothing more than a homogeneous mass of subdivisions, that our kids are so enthralled at the easy-money-shoot-the-angle ethic of a TV society that the hard-working, honest-talking ethic of the farmer will soon forever be gone.

A lot of folks like nothing more than to take a ride on the weekend out to the apple orchards in Farmington or Novi or to the farm areas of Canton and Plymouth Townships -- not so much as tourists but more as searchers after an ethic and a solidity that

seems to have passed them by in the rush for asphalt and cinder block.

There's a lot of talk about a new shopping center in Canton Township, and the big center that was supposed to go into the northwest part of Farmington Township is still floating up in the air preparatory to settling somewhere in that vicinity. It may be that development is inevitable, that growth demands shopping areas, that developers always win.

But at this point of the evolution of the suburbs, it seems to me that we ought to start asking ourselves if the creation of yet another shopping center or the development of yet another condominium project is really worth the final eradication of nearby farms and fields and trees and our heritage in the land.



Mary Dumas' Stand Lauded

Anyone know where I can get a long-stemmed daisy? The stem has to be long enough to conceal a hacksaw blade. I may need to take one to Mary Dumas in the Wayne County Jail next week.

Mrs. Dumas and 16 other county commissioners have been ordered by Circuit Judge Joseph A. Sullivan to begin serving jail sentences next Monday for contempt of court. There's an interesting thing about judges: When they send a dope pusher or murderer or rapist to the hoosegow, it's for a definite term -- a year, five years, life. In a contempt case, however, your stay in jail is indefinite.

I've picked on Mary before when I thought she was wrong, so elemental fairness requires me to back her when she's right. What's more, my support is scored double fortissimo, with amplifiers turned up full blast.

What happened is that the union of circuit court probation officers didn't like the kind of wage settlements other unions were getting from the County Labor Relations Board. So the union made its own deal, for quite a bit more dough (up to 21.6 per cent), with the judges themselves.

The judges ordered the county commissioners to pay the bill. The commissioners -- our legislators -- said "nuts." So Judge Sullivan, despite a conflict of interests, says "jail, March 13."

There's a constitutional question: Does the legislative branch of government pass our budgets, or does a court order a budget and then tell the legislative branch -- and us taxpayers -- humbly to pick up the bill or go to jail?

There's an even bigger question which no court has faced, a question that more lawyers can't comprehend: What kind of fiscal mess will we have if one branch of government is funded automatically while other branches have to go through the review process?

Judge Sullivan will not allow the county to develop orderly pay scales for various classes of civil service. He won't allow our lawmakers to balance the needs of the circuit court against the needs for the hospital, the jail, the treasurer's office, the park system, the air pollution control system, the sheriff's department... and so on.

Judge Sullivan puts on his blinders and says: "Pay any court bills we run up."

That's a dismal way to run a government, but it seems to be the judicial trend. Up in Lansing, as I noted last week, Chief Justice Thomas Kavanagh has had the gall to ask publicly that the courts get an automatic three per cent cut of all revenues, with no legislative questions asked.

County Commissioner Paul Silver, not exactly one of my favorite characters, was right for once when he said: "The king (Sullivan) has dissolved parliament. We no longer have a legislative body in Wayne County."

So today's honor roll includes County Commissioners Mary Dumas (Livonia), Tom Taylor (D-Westland), Brian Arrowsmith with (R-Wayne), Chairman Bob FitzPatrick, Paul Silver and the other commissioners gutsy enough to resist judicial royalty.

But there's one chap I have my doubts about -- Commissioner Dick Manning (D-Redford). You'll recall that Manning once tried to make school busing a county issue, which it certainly isn't; and that Manning had a lot to say when a radical judge wouldn't stand for the pledge to the flag.

Well, when the chips were down on a truly important county issue, Manning abstained. He simply didn't vote. As it turned out, his abstention was legally interpreted as a negative vote, and so he too ultimately came under Judge Sullivan's jail order.

Let's let Manning sit in jail a few days before we bring him a long-stemmed daisy.

Garden City Snubs SEMCOG

Believe it or not, the chairman of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments came to Observeland suburbs last week and the territory is still alive and well.

Chairman James Grannan appeared before the Garden City Chamber of Commerce and he didn't sprout horns, spit fire, or spread any contagious diseases.

In fact, Grannan is from the suburbs of Macomb County where the fears of "supergovernment" from SEMCOG are as strong as anywhere.

It was appropriate he made one of his first public appearances in Garden City where the city council and school board have refused to join the organization.

Although the municipal government is a chamber of commerce member, no officials appeared for the membership luncheon to hear Grannan.

Several administrators denied there was any intentional move to avoid the SEMCOG chairman or boycott his address to the chamber.

But the final result was the same: Grannan was snubbed. Chamber officers asked city officials to attend the luncheon and hoped they would become more conscious of their regional responsibilities.

But the city council has been particularly opposed to joining SEMCOG and department heads were reluctant to shuffle calendars to make the meeting.

Several of the administrators have legitimate reasons for fulfilling their responsibilities in city hall, but there should have been at least one representative from city hall to hear Grannan and heed what he had to say.

The SEMCOG chairman, who comes from a Detroit suburb of 15,000, said that Detroit-area communities have a responsibility to be "good neighbors" and help each other when the need arises.

Grannan insisted he is opposed to "super-government," a fear many cities have of SEMCOG.

He is also opposed to any erosion of cities' home rule, as are Garden City and other officials.

Grannan commented on one of the problems involved with suburban officials who at one time opposed joining SEMCOG but later changed their mind.

The problem is having the suburban officials "saving face" when they change their attitudes and join the regional organization.

But it's difficult to get to the position of changing one's mind when public officials are refusing simply to listen to the other side of the story before making a final conclusion.

Many Peculiarities Of Human Behavior

Some ancient axioms of human behavior:

There is no dress so ugly; so tasteless, that some woman won't buy it.

The most predictable news handout of the week, hot from the mimeo machine of the Michigan Assn. of School Boards, said the MASA board "expressed sincere dismay... at some of the recommendations for tax cuts contained in Gov. Milliken's State of the State address."

Funny thing about our food industry: They always contended that trading stamps don't really raise consumer prices; but federal requirements on the printing of ingredients and nutritional values they see as extremely costly.

In any line at the counter of a drug or party store, 10 per cent of the customers take 90 per cent of the time.

There is no book, film or work of art that is so gross, so morally rancid, that some liberal professor of literature won't contend in court that it has "redeeming social value."

Virtually every school board in Observeland has what it calls "executive" meetings -- secret sessions from which the public is

barred but at which important decisions are made. Yet after repeated challenges on this editorial page, not one of these furtive knaves has had the courage to explain publicly, in writing, how a legislative body can hold an "executive" meeting.

Sense And Nonsense

Steven Patterson, board member of the Farmington Alliance for Neighborhood Schools, says the group was formed "to avoid the disorganization that NAG experienced." Patterson should know, since his brother Brooks was the NAG attorney, using that group as a stepping-stone to become Oakland County prosecutor.

Every television critic I've ever read considers Archie Bunker the butt of all the humor of "All in the Family." They must be snobs or something for failing to see that half the time the long-haired, liberal, sociologist son-in-law, Mike, is the buffoon.

Sense And Nonsense

Snowmobilers defend their pastime by saying only a small minority of bad sports violate laws and damage things; but the truth is that ALL snowmobilers make a racket and spook game.

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