



By Philip H. Power
Publisher

OBSERVATION POINT

Reduced Birth Rate Has Large Impact On Suburban Development

Following national patterns, Michigan's birth rate has dropped like a lead balloon in the last 10 years, and the consequences of that fact will have an enormous impact on the suburbs.

Many, many more families are planning their family size than in the past, what with the easy availability of contraceptive devices. Most newly married couples you talk to say they intend to limit their families to two or, at most, three children.

This comes in sharp contrast to the 1950s, when the large family was in vogue and newlyweds were talking about four or five children without batting an eye.

During this period, the national average for the number of children a woman would have during her child bearing years was 3.7 - the highest in our history. But in only 15 years, according to the U.S. Census, the fertility rate has fallen to 2.03 children per completed family - a rate about equal to that during the Great Depression, and one lower than that needed to produce zero population growth a couple of generations hence.

THE CONSEQUENCES for the suburbs lie in three main areas: sheer growth, schools, and development.

The growth part is the easiest to express in hard numbers.

It has been an article of faith on the part of area planners and most suburban government officials that the growth rate here would not taper off for the foreseeable future. This faith now turns out to be overstated.

Just four years ago, the Transportation and Land Use Study predicted that by 1990 the population of the seven-county Detroit metropolitan area would be around 6.9 million. Instead, the area currently has a population of 4.9 million, and most experts figure that the 6.9 figure is at least 900,000 high of the mark. The state population experts are projecting something like 5.6 million.

If you reason that there are two major factors producing growth in the metropolitan area - migration from elsewhere, mainly the south and growth in the suburbs - the latter factor will be much less important than had previously been assumed.

ONE OF THE main areas this lessening in growth will show up is in local schools.

For the past 20 years or so, the main job of local schools has been to build enough new buildings and hire enough new teachers to get the enormous bulge of kids born in the 1950s educated.

In the suburbs, what happened was an unparalleled growth in local school systems - for a while it seemed that Livonia, Southfield and Farmington were opening a new high school or elementary school every year - coupled with an astonishing willingness on the part of property owners to tax themselves to pay for this growth.

The systems grew, and the taxpayers paid. Then, about three years ago, the taxpayers revolt hit in full fury, and nobody could pass a new millage to save his soul.

At the time, everyone ascribed the revolt to the rise in the cost of living, fear of busing, and an unfair property tax. What was more basically responsible, I suspect, was that the slowdown in birth rate had started, and people understood that they really did

not need to pay for ever-expanding school systems when there were going to be relatively fewer kids going to school than in the past.

This attitude continues. For example, on the past week's school ballot, voters in Plymouth defeated a millage increase by nearly 20%; Redford Union voters passed a renewal by 3-1, but South Redford voters turned down a millage increase while voting for a renewal by a 2-1 margin.

It seems the voters understand the growth patterns of the area better than the population scientists and planners do, and I suspect that the key school politics issue of the next 20 years will be what to do about a declining school enrollment (there are now 30,000 more empty seats in Wayne County elementary classrooms than there were in 1960) when the cost of education per pupil keeps going up because of inflation.

IF THE SUBURBS are going to grow at a less rapid rate than people figured previously, development patterns will necessarily change, too.

Symbolic of the shift is what

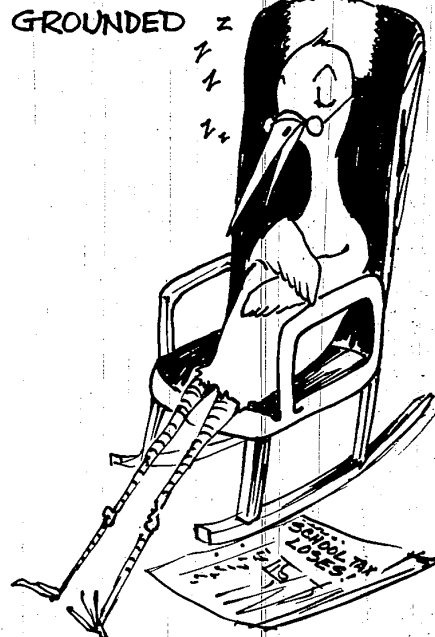
has happened to shopping center development proposals in the past year or two. The big center originally planned for the northwest part of Farmington Township was turned down by the Planning Commission, and the fate of the center planned for Canton Township south of Plymouth is by no means certain.

Some shopping center experts (such as A. Alfred Taubman, who was a moving force in the Farmington center development) predict that the next wave of centers will not be farther out on the concentric ring of development around Detroit, but rather in the city itself.

Somehow I doubt it, because I do not think the transportation and housing problems of Detroit are going to be solved all that rapidly. But the notion still has some appeal in the future.

What I suspect is that folks who want the kind of semi-rural environment that existed in the suburbs in the past will be more likely to find it in the future than most people expected.

We'll be having more of the open spaces than the ticky-tacky, and since that's why most folks moved to the suburbs in the first place, it can only come as an advantage.



Tim Richard writes

Too Many Educators On SC Board?

Well, the voters have finally went and done it. They've elected a board - in this case, for Schoolcraft College - with a majority of educators on it.

How you label such a board depends on your own political philosophy. You could say, "Whee, at last we've got a board with some professionals on it." Or you could say, "Drat, the Educationist Establishment has taken over completely."

I tend to be a "Drat" type myself.

Only three of the eight trustees come from the private sector of the economy: Chairman Jack LaRue, Treasurer Paul Kadish and Trustee Arch Vallier. And when you recall that in 1970 Kadish joined the faculty union on a picket line - well...

Vice Chairman Rosina Raymond is a former college instructor. LeRoy Bennett is a junior high math teacher. Nancie Blatt is a former substitute teacher (and political protégé of Kadish), new trustee Gerald Cox is a high school teacher, and the other new trustee, Ron Cowden, has the title of director of student activities in a high school.

But if there's one thing you learn from dealing with teachers, it's that they DON'T stick together all the time. No matter how gentle a teachers union endorsement is, there will always be a sizable number of teachers who

will say, "That union isn't going to tell me how to vote."

And so we have Bennett, who when he ran two years ago refused to seek the endorsement of the Faculty Forum, the Schoolcraft teachers union; Dr. Cox, who got an unenthusiastic "well qualified" rating from the Forum but no outright endorsement; and Cowden, who was backed by some of the MEA locals but not by the Forum.

I know that Bennett, and I'm confident that Cox and Cowden, will be fairly independent in judgment.

You have to give the Faculty Forum, especially President Richard Arlen and political activist Larry Vandermolen - a lot of credit. The story we got was that the Forum committee "interviewed" each candidate for an hour and a half before making its endorsements.

But one got the distinct impression that the Forum folks did much more than interview. They proselytized. They made it pretty clear what they felt their problems were, and they made it equally clear what they felt the solutions should be.

So good a job did the Forum committee do that several of the candidates, in separate interviews with Observer staff members, answered a question on faculty-administration relations in almost exactly the same words. The

reason is obvious: They were getting their information from a common source.

There's a jargon term for that phenomenon. "Input." The Forum committee got some real input into the thinking of the college board candidates. Even if they don't agree with the Forum's point of view, those candidates knew precisely where the Forum stood.

It will be interesting, in the months ahead, to see whether the Forum and the Student Senate renew the push for student and/or faculty "advisory" seats on the board. They call 'em "advisory" seats, but I call them "lobbyists."

Groups have a right to have lobbyists; indeed, our political processes would be worse off without them. But I shudder at the notion of letting a lobbyist sit down with the members of a legislative body and take part in the discussion, and then calling that lobbyist an "advisor."

At one time, the Michigan Education Assn. (of which the Faculty Forum is an affiliate) sought the power to bargain collectively as the solution to teachers' woes. When that failed to get them everything they wanted, they turned to political power.

And are they getting it!

Steve Barnab writes

Time For Action On Energy Crises

The time is long overdue for business, consumers, ecologists, and politicians to look beyond their self-serving noses and bind together in collective and cooperative action to solve the energy crises.

The fact is that all of the above mentioned groups spend the majority of time pointing the finger of guilt at one another while the nation consumes 1.5 million barrels of crude oil and gas liquids each day, but the nation's refineries process only 12.3 million a day.

Basically, a consumer oriented society, Americans have become a nation of gluttons using nearly 40 per cent of the petroleum consumed throughout the world while making up only six per cent of the world population. Needless to say, in this we haven't endeared ourselves to the other nations.

Recent action by Canada to limit import into the United States reflects the world attitude that no longer should we waste irreplaceable natural resources. Before this move, our northern neighbors were our largest source of foreign oil, supplying 1.1 million barrels a day.

Strangely enough, while we alienate the rest of the world, businesses continue to manufacture products which use great quantities of fuel, ecologists strangle the flow of

sources with religious fervor, consumers diligently overconsume, and politicians underlegislate.

One of the largest offenders in the crises is Detroit's own, the automobile. Accounting for 25 per cent of the total U.S. energy use, it is manufactured to operate more inefficiently each year.

A recent study reveals that fuel economy of a 1973 standard size car is off 21 per cent from a 1965 model and in 1975 will be off 26 per cent.

Ironically, one major reason for this decrease in economy is added weight to car bodies because of the addition of safety equipment.

Adding to the problem is a report that consumers are misusing their automobile. Fifty-four per cent of all trips are less than five miles. Even in longer trips, the average six passenger car contains only 1.4 persons.

Another energy consumer is housing at 33 per cent. Such things as proper insulation, more efficient appliances, and proper consumer usage could save billions of tons of coal a year. Turning down the thermostat two degrees year-round in American homes would save 100 million tons annually.

President Nixon has asked manufacturers to provide information to label efficiency of their

products. Even if complied with, it would be difficult to get apathetic consumers to cooperate.

Consequences of such deplorable waste are limitless. They go beyond running out of gas for the car or snowmobile. Food prices will rise even higher because farmers won't have sufficient fuel to operate machinery to cultivate crops, homes will go unheated, medical ointments and creams made of petroleum base will be in short supply.

Plastics, synthetic rubbers, fertilizers, hydraulic fluids, solvents and insecticides will also run short.

With President Nixon proposing \$770 million and Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) \$800 million for research and development in the energy field, both political parties have fallen far short of the estimated \$2 billion a year scientists say is necessary to develop alternative energy sources.

In the meantime, ecology groups have blocked moves to have a pipeline from Alaska which would add more time by providing enough petroleum for decades to come.

On a larger scale, a shortage of fuel has already affected military fuel supplies and also leaves this nation potentially a victim to

less than friendly nations in the mid-East.

Col. Moammear Khadafi, ruler of oil-rich Libya, has threatened to take over Western oil firms in his country.

If Americans can think of no other reason to cease being wasteful, look to your children, and the generations to come. It seems well worth it to tighten the belt now so that they may enjoy some semblance of the pleasures we have experienced as a great nation.

Henrik Ibsen once said, "I hold that man is in the right who is most closely in league with the future."

Let's be in the right.

Sense And Nonsense

Canton Township recently passed a "topless-bottomless" ordinance that prohibits risque entertainment in the township. It also includes a section outlawing dirty books and movies.

Asked to comment on the ordinance, Township Clerk John Flodin blushed: "I can't - the wording is almost too pornographic in content."

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