

OBSERVATION POINT

Population Losses In Local Suburbs Caused By Fears Of School Busing

By Philip H. Power
Publisher

Biggest news to hit the suburbs in quite a while was the recent announcement that most are not growing as fast as they expected and that some have actually lost population over the past three years.

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, which acts as the agent for the U.S. Census Bureau in this area, dropped the bombshell at the end of last month.

SEMOG admitted that it had overestimated suburban growth in the past, and that new estimates of the changes in population showed growth in the inner ring of suburban communities near Detroit had leveled off or stopped.

In particular, the SEMOG revised figures showed population drops from 1970 to 1973 for four local cities: Livonia, which lost 885; City of Plymouth, which dropped 330; Redford Township, which lost 3,085; and Garden City, which dropped 1,102.

James Trainer, SEMOG executive director, added that the "loss leaders are clustered around Detroit and along the Woodward corridor."

Local government units showing the biggest population jumps in the same three year period were

Livingston County (12,000 increased population, 20 per cent growth rate), Washtenaw County (19,000 more people, 8.2 per cent increase) and Lapeer County.

What happened? Why?

Fear of busing, for one.

Ever since Judge Stephen Roth began making noises that he would like to see an integration plan for the entire Detroit metropolitan area's schools feature cross-district busing, countless thousands of suburbanites vowed they'd rather move out of the threatened areas than have their children bused back into Detroit. Some of them have done just that.

Livingston County Equalization Director Clair Simons, as an official of the most rapidly growing county in the state, is in a position to know why.

"The dominant theme people have is getting out of the Detroit area school bus situation," Simons says.

"When people look for property out here they usually say they want to be moved in by Sept. 1. That doesn't mean they want to celebrate Labor Day here."

Livingston County is outside the ring of 53 suburban school districts which could be affected by a school busing plan. So is Washtenaw. So is Lapeer County.

Many local officials and real estate men dispute

SEMOG's figures and question whether people would undergo the cost and inconvenience of moving just because of the threat of a busing plan which is still tied up in the courts.

Livonia City Planner John Nagy, for one, disputes the SEMOG methodology, which in effect counts the number of occupied housing units in a city and then multiplies that by an average number of people per unit. SEMOG used an average of 3.01 persons per household, noting that birth rate and family size have declined in recent years.

Nagy says this is "grossly wrong," arguing that Livonia's average family size is more nearly that of the 3.9 person per household figure recently used by the school system to estimate the city's population.

Nagy also says the city has added 1,400 new housing units in the past three years, which were not counted by SEMOG, and he estimates the city's present population at 115,600, up five per cent from 1970.

Other local city officials, facing drops in government and school revenues which are allocated by population data, are making the same kind of argument.

I am inclined to agree with those who say the SEMOG numbers are too low for local suburbs. Taking some assumed number of persons per household and then multiplying it by the number of occu-

pled housing units is much too general a way of computing population across suburbs which differ substantially in income and family age characteristics.

Dearborn, for example, has a relatively high average age population pattern, and accordingly will have fewer than average persons per household because children have grown up and left home after school. But Livonia, for example, has a younger population base and, accordingly, more people per household.

The general point made by the SEMOG report, however, makes sense. Anyone who drove through these suburbs and saw just how many "This Family Will Not Be Bused" signs in picture windows knows darn well that many, many people were very, very concerned about the prospect of busing.

Many such persons moved in 1970-72, while the possibilities of cross district busing remained hot.

And for public officials to assume that local feelings about busing have changed merely because the issue is working its way laboriously through the courts would be entirely wrong.

My guess is that if Judge Roth's busing order is finally overruled in the U.S. Supreme Court, these suburbs will resume a pattern of growth. If it isn't, well, all I can do is advise the officials of Livingston County to hold onto their hats.



Are We Taking Shortages Seriously?

We just can't believe residents of the seven communities in the Observer Newspapers circulation area are taking the energy and fuel shortages very seriously.

There seemed to be more cars on the streets, roads and highways in the area on Sunday than usual.

Of course, there were some contributing factors - perfect weather and perhaps the final weekend of the season for driving and visiting, shopping centers open for the anticipated Christmas buying rush, hundreds of visitors to St. Mary Hospital folks who have to visit friends on the weekends because they are working six days a week and several plants operating (how can workers get there except in their own cars?).

Regardless of the reasons, the highways and byways were filled with cars. During our inspection tour that carried into Westland, Livonia and Redford Township, we had the opportunity to learn what folks are doing. Most certainly they were not interested in the TV showing of the Detroit Lions game; they weren't watching the tube at all but seemed to be heading for the stores, large and small, passed up

the closed service stations and seemed to just enjoy driving around.

This isn't exactly what government officials had in mind when they asked gasoline operators to keep pumps closed over the weekend. They thought folks would stay at home and watch the tube or listen to radio.

We have no idea what will happen after the holidays but have a distinct feeling things won't be that much different between now and the end of the year.

Traditionally the month of December, especially in the final 10 days, is the time for visits with friends and relatives at faraway places. It's a time when we all have a desire to get together with our parents, the only time when we can make arrangements to get away from jobs for any period of time.

And for a good many, the next making plane reservations early to make sure of the trip. Now things are entirely different, airlines are cutting off many daily trips, they are furloughing pilots and other skilled workers for the first time ever.

There was a time several years ago when one could climb aboard a passenger train and get home to visit

Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters and all the new nieces and nephews. That's out now since there are very few trains and, in most instances, none to small cities, towns and villages.

Bus service is limited due to the same fuel shortage, so it all adds up to making those trips by driving and the full knowledge that you may be faced with a lack of gasoline if making such trips on the weekend.

For example, service stations on the Ohio Turnpike plan to close on the weekends from 9 p.m. Saturday to

midnight Sunday. It means that you won't have a chance to fill up prior to getting on the highway and then get additional fuel when the tank starts to show empty. You must have enough to go from the start of your journey until you arrive at destination.

That isn't quite possible if one is making a trip say from Detroit to Youngstown, O. or Pittsburgh, Pa. The only alternative is to travel during the week, take a chance of gasoline being dished out on the turnpike or make up your mind to leave it now and then to fill up at stations in the many exits.

During a trip over the Ohio Turnpike a week ago, to attend a funeral at a city just short of Pennsylvania, we learned that some drivers are heading the request for a 50-mile speed limit.

Especially was this true of cars bearing licenses from the states along the Atlantic seaboard where the 50 mph limit already is in effect and being enforced.

These drivers were going along at the reduced limit, but it must have been discouraging to drive at 50 and see Ohio licensed motorists

speed by at around 80 along with buses and trucks.

It makes the blood boil a little to drive at 50 to 60 and have a big truck - trailer whip by at 70. Not only is it disconcerting but it is dangerous. One never knows when one of the trucks or buses will ram into the rear of your car.

It is happening and probably will continue as long as cars have a lower speed limit than buses and trucks. Naturally, the drivers of such feel they are superior to any other motorists. We can tell you this isn't necessarily true.

Old Question Pops Up Again

This annual rite of spring does serve one purpose - other than help school boards raise money - and that is to again point out the injustice of using the local property tax for the basic financial support of local school districts.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled on one aspect of the issue and said that while

it isn't the best system yet devised, it isn't illegal or unconstitutional.

There are some school people who feel the court case wasn't effectively argued on the right issues.

There is an amendment to the constitution which has something to do with "equal protection of the law."

In Michigan and 49 other states, public education is required by law and attendance by youngsters between five and 18 is mandatory. Since the state constitution calls for the state govern-

ment to be ultimately responsible for public schools, then it should be responsible for its support, instead of just part of that support.

Gov. William Milliken earlier this year did something to make the burdens on tax load on homeowners easier to carry. He did this through a property tax rebate - up to a maximum of \$500 - for persons filing state tax returns next spring.

That step by Milliken is overdue and in the long run makes it a bit easier for local school boards to gain

public approval of local millage proposals.

But the other half of the problem remains for school boards to solve - where to find sufficient funds from local property taxpayers to meet ever increasing costs of running a large local school system.

Next spring's millage votes probably won't be the last in Michigan. But we certainly hope that state legislators get the message and start to work on past campaign promises to do something about school financing.

How To Keep Home Fires Burning

With Christmas around the corner and the chill winds already here, the time has come to consider bits of wisdom from the past.

A whole flock of things come to mind that used to be very amusing tidbits from history... Martha Washington and Queen Elizabeth I

wearing long wool stockings... all Colonial ladies from the Mason-Dixon line north in wool petticoats... warming pans to slip between cold

sheets... lap robes... pictures of Englishmen wearing mufflers while they eat breakfast.

Pictures of Englishmen with their mufflers and knitted caps climbing into bed... strings of cranberries and popcorn on the Christmas tree, roasted chestnuts, hot cider, not mulled wine, hot stew for breakfast and Irish coffee any time.

More discarded knowledge sure to hit the revival trail concerns wood and how it burns. The wood burning stove is suddenly a precious commodity and so is the stuff inside.

Stores in Observerland are willing to promise delivery on wood stoves anywhere from nine months to a year and the price of cord wood has jumped higher than a one story house.

Ralph Evert, of Farmington, is a "wood man." The hard woods such as hickory and ash Evert describes as "slow burners."

"Oak," he says, "is a moderate burner. So is birch. Maple is a hard wood, slow burning and gives off a lot of heat." For the aesthetically minded, birch gets the nod. It is

pretty as it burns, but it doesn't last as long as hickory or oak according to our resident expert. The fruit woods such as apple have a tendency to blacken the chimney with soot. They are best used in combination with oak.

Oedar, pine and poplar are what Evert calls "gofer wood." "You use one piece and go for another."

He also cautions novice wood burners to use a screen when burning cedar, pine and fir. He describes a chain reaction which he calls "gas pop" or small explosions which will send small pieces flying out from the flame.

Stands to reason, Evert says, that split logs burn faster than whole ones. There are more surfaces for the fire to attack.

And for those who can afford bacon and intend to try it on the wood stove, hickory is first choice. It makes a hot fire and the smoke peps up the flavor.

Christmas is a sentimental time anyhow. It may be just the time to take the plastic from our lives and replace it with hot cider, chestnuts and popcorn around the new wood stove.

As I parked by the pump and sighted from my car, a dark figure appeared from nowhere, grabbed my necktie and demanded my wallet. I instinctively said, "Like hell I will," and then "all hell" broke loose.

Two other characters - or better, cowards - immediately appeared and the fight was on, and over, in minutes. Results: I was stabbed three

times in the abdomen and once in the back. I salvaged my money wallet, but they got my ID wallet with some cash, driver's license, and registrations, all my credit cards and irreplaceable pictures of my grandchildren. They broke my watch and hurt my pride.

For once in my life, though, I was happy I had developed a "pot belly." The surgeons at Wayne County General Hospital said that was all that saved my life as the intestines were not punctured.

This was my first experience in my 62 years, in any hospital. All I can say is that the staff was very efficient, kind, humorous and tremendously sympathetic. They gently notified my lovely wife and family, who came out in force in the dark of night against my instructions.

I spent the night in intensive care unit and am now home licking my wounds and vowing that next time - hope there won't be one - I will not argue with "have knife, will travel" - my original advice to my clientele.

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Editorial & Opinion

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