editorial opinion

Susan Averill writes

Teachers avoid stumping for school tax boost

If you hear about a teacher campaigning for the millage, you're liable to question his motive. The teachers seem like a squeaky part of the school system machinery, all of which demands to be oiled.

Teachers, however, are sensitive to this criticism. They as individuals have avoided the public soapbox. To be sure, the Farmington Education Association (FEA) has gone on record in favor of the tax increase. Teachers also represent a goodly portion of the audience at board meetings on the issue.

Parents become indignant, hearing their children discuss what the teacher told them about the millage. Students, they insist, are being brainwashed and used by the teaching accomplices of the school board to threaten parents into an April 29 "yes" vote.

THIS IS what Farmington High School student council president Jan Atkinson felt when she cautioned her council peers to be careful conducting their information and registration campaign among eligible 18-year-olds.

"We have to be careful, or it's going to look like they're (the school board) using the students to get the millage passed," she said at a recent student council meeting.

The question probably came up in the classroom when anxious students asked for assurance that their favorite class would survive budget cuts. Or perhaps they wanted to know whether the young teacher with whom they have established so much rapport will be permanently amputated from the system, a victim of the "bumping" process.

It might be wise to examine the millage issue from the teacher's point of view. In their position, they see ramifications to millage failure that parents might miss, and most of them stem from the shortened senior high day.

Unlike the student's, the teacher's day will not end abruptly at 1:45 p.m. The last negotiated teacher's contract requires them to work a seven-and-a-quarter-hour day, students or no. And so they will.

But the day will be a little different. Class after class will pour into the room, with only a 15-minute "nutrition break" somewhere around lunchtime. Many will see as many as 150 students pass throught their rooms, without an opportunity to sit down and individualize instruction techniques.

This time, usually referred to as the "prep period," will come at the end of the day for all teachers. Not only is the time used for preparation or revision of the lesson, but it is used as a conference hour.

To speak to a teacher about a problem, a student will have to remain after the school day has ended. Naturally this poses a problem for the student who rides the bus or has committed himself to a structured extracurricular activity after school. It will mean more work for the parent who must juggle schedules to bring the child home again.

LIKEWISE, parent conferences will be limited to the same time. So while mom or dad is on the way to school to speak to the teacher about Johnny's social problem, Johnny may be left at home unsupervised. The five-hour day leaves no room for flexibility.

Dealing with large numbers of people at any time is emotionally fatiguing, and it's no different for a teacher. By his fourth or fifth consecutive class, he is likely to be less patient, less adaptive and less attentive to individual needs.

Most teachers are conscientious. They want to do their best by their daytime charges and it is in their best interests to do so.

So when a teacher speaks about the millage, it might be enlightening to listen. It's because he's at the grassroots level that he, more than anyone else, sees where millage failure will cripple the area's most important resource.

Wylie Gerdes writes

Efficiency may lose to politics

The meeting of suburban leaders and Mayor Coleman Young of Detroit in Southfield last week was awash with politics.

The suburban group, led by Livonia Mayor Edward McNamara, wanted assurances water rates won't be raised while Young wanted help in developing mass transit and schools in Detroit.

Suburbs of Detroit are served by the Detroit water system. There have been charges of profiteering by Detroit and counter charges of exploitation by suburbs.

The only point of agreement seemed to be that the Detroit water system was ruthlessly run by career civil servants. Not necessarily inefficiently run, since rates are comparatively low, but run in a "high-handed manner," as Young put it.

McNamara mentioned the key issue involved.

"Unfortunately, politics never got into it and that's one of its problems," McNamara said about the water system's operation.

Politics, for the past several thousands years, has been something of a dirty word. Since Richard Nixon added more connotations to the word, it has been even dirtier.

WHEN McNAMARA made that comment, I wondered how it affected his audience. Many of those attending were civil servants—such as Southfield City Manager Peter Christiano and Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman. Were they offended by the implications that governments act in the best interests of constituents only when politicans are in control!

"Man is a political animal," a Greek said, though another translation implies that man is a city-dwelling, social animal.

My basic premise has been that efficiency and democracy are often opposing goals. If people want efficiency in their government, they are going to have to give up some participation.

The reason is that if efficiency is the goal, only a few relatively simple factors need be considered. When democracy is the top priority, a multitude of conflicting claims must be considered.

IF WATER rates are what concern the suburban leaders, maybe they had best leave the Detroit water system to its civil servants. Political control of the water system is going to result in higher rates ultimately.

However, if greater democracy is the goal, by all means continue to press for suburban representation on the Detroit water board.

YOUNG put on a particularly impressive display for his suburban audience. Many writers have remarked that he has the style of a 19th century politician, a Mayor Richard Daley-ish power broker complex.

This was about the third time I have seen Young speak in person. The other times were before audiences which must be considered more favorable than the suburban group. Young was more impressive before his "enemies" than before his friends.

He played on the group's basic common interest—a desire to retain local control.

Detroit also wants to retain local control, Young said. There are natural areas of cooperation, such as mass transit and water distribution, but basically the city wants to run its own affairs.

Young also implied that suburbs are being ungrateful whelps by forgetting that Detroit taxpayers financed the water expansion into the hinterlands in the first place.

THOUGH his position lacks some of the glamour of metropolitan reorganization such as has sparked Toronto's resurgence, Young's provincialism may go farther toward bringing city and suburb together. The suburban officials seem to listen more willingly to his urban provincialism than to philosophies of benign regionalism.

Altruism may be something foreign to a politician. A clear motivation such as protecting one's own baliwick, is more acceptable.

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