

# OBSERVATION POINT



## Livonia Schoolmen: They're Out Of Touch

By Philip H. Power

The schools in Observerland occupy a role of enormous importance.

Our kids — of whom there are many more than in other kinds of communities — go there to get educated (we hope). Our PTA's and other community groups meet there. Sometimes we have dinner there, or listen to music there.

Schools take up a darn big chunk of our tax money. Often (as in Livonia) they have the largest payroll of any institution in the city. If their teachers and other staff members are well organized, they constitute a political force of the first magnitude.

That's why it's so important for schools to keep in close touch with the community, and why so much trouble comes if they don't.

The following story, then, is an analytic, cautionary tale. It centers around the Livonia school system, but it could (and does) apply to nearly every school system in Observerland. It illustrates how a good system, capable, run, with well thought-out programs, can get in trouble.

In 1968, the Livonia system's public relations guy, Paul Lutzeier, resigned. For a number of reasons, lack of funds included, a PR position was not budgeted in 1968-69.

So no PR man. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a PR guy is not someone who is hired to make the lives of reporters easier. In many cases, a PR staffer can make their job

much harder.

The real function of a PR guy is to help an institution — be it a company, a baseball club, a school system — think about the importance of communicating to its constituency. A good PR guy is not someone who makes high policy decisions, but he ought to be brought into the decision-making process at some point to make sure people in the community are going to be fully informed of what's going on.

This was precisely what did not happen in Livonia in connection with the sex education program and the decision to put grades 5-8 on half-day sessions. And it is precisely because of this that the Livonia school system presently finds itself in trouble.

**THE SEX** education program was conceived with care but in extreme quiet.

The first this newspaper heard about it was in March of this year, after the program had been in operation for some weeks, when the petition drive against the program was started. At no point in the development of the course did the school system make a serious attempt to contact this newspaper to explain what the course was, why it was being offered, and how it worked. At no point did the school system attempt to explain to the general public — not merely the parents of the children involved — just what was going on.

So what happened? People were uninformed. They were con-

vinced. They became fearful and hostile. And the school system suffered.

If the Livonia schools had taken just the little step some competent PR guy would have suggested and tried to get some advance explanation of the program out to the community, I suspect its problems would have been much less serious.

**THE CASE** of the half-day sessions is very similar. At the time the school millage was voted on this spring, the school board said that half-day sessions would be required if the millage went down. It went down. People listened for a while, then yawned. Time passed. Budgeting work continued in the school system.

Then in July, one of our reporters happened to be talking with a member of the school board when she was told, "We're going to hire two-thirds the regular number of teachers for grades five and six and set scheduling for half days for grades seven and eight."

"When are you going to announce this?" asked our reporter.

"We have told the administration to go ahead," was the answer.

Little explanation to the community at large, except for letters to the parents directly affected. No clear explanation that the board had made a number of other budget cuts and was run-

ning a deficit, but that half-day sessions were still required. No full attempt to explain what was going on to the whole community.

Nothing was done that a PR guy might have suggested.

Results? Anger. Irritation from parents. Court action.

**SO THE POINT** of this tale is not that the sex education pro-

gram was wrong or that the decision to go on half days was ill-advised. In fact, I think both were rational, sound and courageous.

What does trouble me is that on both, the school system failed to communicate adequately and consistently to the community what was being done and why.

It is this that has given the odd group that is trying to destroy a fine school system its only shred of credibility in the community. And this is too bad.

Livonia has a fine school system, well run and staffed. And Livonia has a number of good rational people who stand behind the system.

They should get together.



Dennis L. Pajot writes

Sue Shaughnessy writes

## Redford Shoots From The Hip

"A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." Article II of the Bill of Rights of the U. S. Constitution.

Forevermore subject to interpretation as to the intent of the Constitution's framers and enigmatic in its use of commas, that article of the Bill of Rights has caused federal and state legislators months of agony attempting to formulate gun control laws.

Not so the legislative body of Redford Township. Within three days after its police department felt threatened enough by a "not obviously armed" motorcycle band, it adopted a strict local ordinance.

The township board seemed to pass it off with the ever-increasing attitude, "If we don't like something, we'll just legislate against it and take our chances when it comes to court."

Such shoddy handling of the basic tool of "law and order" is precisely why the most necessary tool — people's respect for the law — is disappearing.

**NO MORAL OR LEGAL** explanation for having the ordinance given to the board before it voted unanimously to put it on the books.

The most that was said was Supervisor A. Dick Bellaire's comment, "At least we'll have a charge we can make against these people."

He was referring to about 100 motorcyclists chased out of Dearborn Heights into Redford Township the previous weekend. They massed in a drive-in restaurant here, according to police who responded with several scout cars.

According to unofficial accounts from the police, when the scout cars arrived they encircled a suspected group leader. The other cyclists then reportedly circled the scout cars much like old-west Indians around a wagon train.

Although the cyclists apparently showed no guns, the police were ordered to shoulder arms at the sides of their cars. The circling cyclists cut out.

**WHY A GUN CHARGE** is needed in the police arsenal for such circumstances is beyond comprehension. It seems like a case that could be handled with the "disorderly conduct" ordinance, if — indeed — formal charges are needed at all.

The gun ordinance specifies two things, basically. One is a complete ban on firearms under

30 inches being carried in public, unless the owner has a concealed weapon permit.

This, in itself, is faulty, since it's the only ordinance we know of that says a "concealed" weapon is the same as one, say, that is carried in plain sight.

The ordinance, as written, prohibits anyone from taking a pistol home from the sporting goods

store to one's collection display board. Longarms, on the other hand, are not completely banned.

They can be transported if they are encased, wrapped, tied shut and unloaded provided they are being carried from a place of purchase to the residence, to and from hunting or firearms practice, or to and from a regulated

gun range. If you happen to be taking it to the sporting goods store to have its steel blued you're subject to a \$100 fine or 90 days in jail.

**THE PUBLIC STREETS** are yours to use only if you're not transporting a gun on them, or, if you are, you do it like the new ordinance says.



## 'This Is The Week That ...' It's Really The Bridge Of Sighs

By Don Hoenshell

There was a time when lawmakers considered striding across the Mackinac Bridge while riding the Colonel Bogie March, stomping in cadence and wearing grimaces that would wilt a cactus. Like 138 Alex Guinnesses in Bridge On The River Kwai.

They didn't and they've been sorry every Labor Day. Now, they also serve who only sit and hurt.

That was the year (1957) the bridge was opened on Nov. 1. The glory and tumult was shared by whom? By Gov. Williams, of course, and then Lt. Gov. Philip A. Hart, and a taxicab driver from West Branch. That statesman rounded up disabled veterans and gave them a free ride to the scene.

**THE NEXT YEAR** was the start of the Labor Day marches across the bridge — the world's longest suspension span, as we wrote — by a band of walking buffs, headed, of course, by the governor. Traffic was blocked to keep off the folks who were paying \$98 million for it, of course.

Governors since that day have marched across the bridge. It is fascinating, and should someday be the subject of entomological research, that television cameras and unkempt reporters with pencils attract politicians. Especially those with clout, like governors.

It happened again this Labor Day. Gov. Milliken marched like the rest. There is an occupational hazard! Governors have to march the five-mile route smiling or the pedestrian will blow the

Milliken, while not as young as he looks, trained by walking partway to work last Thursday

morning. Reporters followed and there ensued a lesson: As reporters get older and less athletic it is wise to do something spectacular which doesn't require that much vim. The picture showed a vigorous Milliken leading a pack of something that other pictures called the Bataan Death March.

What does it profit a politician to gain the 6 o'clock news and lose his own reporters? And cameramen? A tree falling in a forest, out of human earshot doesn't make a noise! Anyway, I digress. The bridge was built, opened, and the cars, trucks and buses flooded over it, a means through tolls to retire the bonds.

**BACK IN 1948**, Williams, at the behest of a Detroit News reporter who was asked to give him an idea of what would appeal to the Upper Peninsula, campaigned up there on a bridge over the Straits of Mackinac.

Before that, former Gov. Murray D. Van Wagoner built a causeway into the straits from the north side at St. Ignace ostensibly to make a small boat harbor then known as "Van Wagoner's Folly." Soapy later had it called "Soapy's Folly." See how politics works to make folly a virtue? The fight to get the bridge built was fought in the Michigan Legislature. There were years of travail, of research and analysis. Few people now remember the \$19,000 a year out of tax money the legislature pledged for maintenance.

When the bridge was dedicated, a guy sat in his motel at the 6 o'clock news while the bridge left out and alone. He was the late former Senator William Ellsworth (R-St. Ignace), who had

sponsored the original legislation and fought it through to passage despite a heart condition which eventually killed him.

He couldn't drink away his sorrow even if he wanted to. Even a tough, cynical reporter would talk to Bill under these conditions, the woe of a Bassett and the wistful look of Bernadette.

"Bill, this is a great day for you," I said. "How come you're not down cutting the ribbon or busting a champagne bottle over the north pier?" "Nobody invited me," he said.

## Editorial & Opinion

### OBSERVER NEWSPAPERS, INC.

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The Livonia Observer • The Redford Observer • The Westland Observer  
The Garden City Observer • The Plymouth Mail & Observer  
The Farmington Enterprise & Observer



Published by Observer Newspapers, Inc.  
271 S. Main Street, P.O. Box 202, Plymouth, Mich. 48170

Serving the communities of:  
Livonia, Plymouth, Farmington, Canton, Township, Farmington,  
Farmington Township, Redford Township, Garden City, Westland.

Don Hoenshell, Editor

## It's Not Just Show Biz ... Art Draws Industry

Once upon a time a move by industry to a small town in the hinterland meant that the company sought a cheap labor supply and a lower tax bill.

These still might be factors, but they aren't the only reasons if you consider three separate incidents related during the national convention of the American Community Theater Association.

Consider the fact that when the Spokane (Wash.) Civic Theater conducted a fund drive to construct a new \$350,000 theater the funds were raised on the basis that the existence of a viable community theater group would help attract industry to the Spokane area.

The fund drive was successful and last year the group moved into the new arts center for the season.

When IBM announced the construction of a major plant in Rochester, Minn. a few years ago the community listed 10 basic reasons for choosing that particular location.

The seventh on the list was the existence of a community theater in the town.

Last year Controlled Data announced that it would build a major plant in the Omaha, Neb. area. A report in the Omaha pa-

per quoted a company official as saying one of the primary factors in deciding on that particular location was the existence of a functioning community theater in Omaha.

No person is really so naive to believe that economic factors are not important in the site locations for industry.

It isn't even really feasible to believe that industry planners have become so enchanted with theater in general and community theater in particular that a decision will stand or fall on whether or not a theater group is producing plays.

What the stories illustrate is a very basic change in corporate thinking.

If an area has a community theater then the chances are great that the residents also support some sort of musical group and maybe even a dance group.

This is good planning because it shows that industry is now stopping to think about the overall quality of life for their employees.

What is the skilled technician and educated manager or executive supposed to do outside his 40 hours of work, if his plant is located in the middle of the boon-docks?

More important what are the educated wives of these employees expected to find for entertainment in the middle of nowhere?

That's why business examines all areas of community life before deciding just where to locate that new plant.

Whether or not a community theater group exists in our own area might not be as important as it would when considering Spokane, Wash., but it's still food for thought.

Right here in Observerland there are two community colleges offering cultural activities, three major and two minor community theater groups, two local symphonies, a youth symphony movement, a functioning ballet school, and a civic band plus a variety of local artist clubs.

All this might be used as an additional selling point to attract that vital tax base that each municipality seeks.

It also points up the fact that local cultural organizations are gaining and becoming more sophisticated in their approach to and presentation of the arts.

That's a thought for their potential audience to consider and for the members of the groups to remember.