

editorial opinion



Public outcry is one big joke

I've seen some sorry displays of how the democratic process can be abused, but this week's Farmington Hills council session was pathetic.

Frankly, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

In case you've missed the nickel and dime assessment role bill which has turned into a million dollar mountain, listen up.

About 300 folks turned out for a public hearing Monday night to carp about being levied 12 cents a foot for having five applications of calcium chloride put on their dirt roads.

You would have thought the council was asking each homeowner to turn over the property deed.

Such noble but misused terms as "taxation without representation" were thrown together with the completely inane "We are the forgotten ones" and "Let's go back to being a township."

Of course, I can't forget my favorite suburban cry of futility, "We want to maintain our rural atmosphere." But I'll have to give the crowd some credit: Only one person used that line during the three-hour public menagerie, which was supposed to be a public hearing on the necessity of using chloride for dust control.

IT FASCINATES me how residents object when somebody else is getting a free ride to the public offer, but when they see themselves endangered, they yell "foul."

The surface issue (no pun intended) is that the council wants to stop paying for chloriding out of the gas and weight tax funds and save the money for maintaining roads. Some taxpayers think it's a kind of injustice to fork over 20 or 30 bucks a year to pay for it themselves.

The much deeper issue revolves around the attitude of those present. Basically, these middle and high-income residents, most of whom have a pretty good education, are ignorant of how their local government operates.

Their ignorance was compounded only by their arrogance. The clincher was when the very emotional gallery of residents demanded that they, not the council, vote on the issue right there at the public hearing.

Keep in mind that while 300 did show for the circus, another 3,700 who received notices on the hearing stayed home.

The council, on the other hand, found itself in a real contradiction.

The public hearing was for the necessity of chloriding the roads to control dust during the summer months. They did vote affirmatively that there was a necessity, but allowed 40 per cent of those eligible for the special assessment to opt out of the program.

Now, if it were a necessity, why were a few persons allowed to bug out?

The entire evening was a sad display of both leadership and resident comprehension.

Time to goof off

Man (and woman, too) was born to work.

This ancient principle is pretty well accepted as evidenced by the wheels of industry and commerce that keep spinning.

But our dedication to all this is pretty difficult in warm and sunny May.

For Michigan, now comes the sweet smell of spring (between tornado warnings and watches, of course).

Our desks are piled with things to do, or there are racks of parts to be tooled beside our machines. Yet our thoughts are hundreds of miles away.

Vivid pictures of us striding down a fairway or cracking a booming serve or quietly studying a beautifully-formed yellow crocus occupy our minds.

The day's work is left far behind. And well it might be. This is a time to stop, relax, enjoy our world.

It's spring in Michigan.

Lower sewage rates, but no reform

Suburban customers of Detroit's water and sewer system won a dollar battle last week, but failed to get reform of the system.

Three "masters"—engineering and legal specialists appointed by a federal judge—found Detroit was overcharging its suburban customers for sewage treatment.

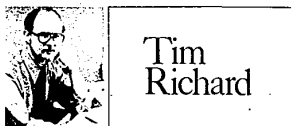
Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn declared with joy that "we won all the major issues we raised as to the rate-making principles," and that statement appears to be so, as far as it goes.

HISTORICALLY, when Detroit built its sewage treatment plant in 1940, about half the \$26 million construction cost came from the Detroit general fund. The city's taxpayers were in effect stockholders of the system. It was altogether fitting and proper to build charges for depreciation and a rate of return into the sewage treatment prices.

But the city's true investment in the plant has long since been depreciated. No more city general funds have been pumped in. Yet the Detroit water board continued to build those costs into the sewage rate.

The masters' report and recommendations amount to 150 legal-sized pages of quite heavy reading, but from them emerges a bizarre picture:

Detroit gets federal and state grants for its treatment plant—those grants coming, of course, more heavily from the suburbs than from the urban center. Detroit then charges us for depreciation of the plant our federal and state taxes built. Then Detroit adds on top of that a seven per cent



rate of return, in effect charging us a profit for our money.

THE SUBURBS did not, however, do so well in trying to get structural reform of the Detroit water board.

About two-thirds of the sewage received, customers served and money paid into the Detroit system are suburban.

The Detroit city charter provides that the water board be composed of seven persons, at least four of whom must be Detroit residents. Unlike the members of your local planning commission, who serve for a term, Detroit water board members serve at the pleasure of the mayor. Coleman Young has shown he can and will remove a suburban appointee who starts probing too carefully.

Well, the masters did not see fit to propose a corrective reform here. They reasoned that the city-suburban dispute was a contract fight, and representation on the Detroit water board wasn't part of the contract.

"THERE IS NO showing whatever that the rate structure violates any contractual requirements

because of the method of structuring the board of water commissioners," said the masters.

"Retroactive invalidation of governmental acts is not an acceptable remedy for malapportionment. . . . Even if some colorable claim to representation can be made, it should be advanced in other proceedings seeking other forms of relief."

The masters' decision was probably correct, in the very narrow legal sense, but it was unfortunate. The sad truth is that the reason city and suburbs are in this rate making mess, and fighting each other, is that the system of governing a multi-county utility is sadly out of date. One city is just too small a unit to govern adequately a regional utility.

No one is going to trust Detroit's water and sewer rates as long as four Young henchmen and three tame suburbanites run it. We are doomed to a continuation of inter-municipal warfare until a better, more equitable governing board is set up. Kuhn's deputy, Bob Fredericks, raised objections to Detroit's financial reporting practices, personnel practices and purchasing procedures. The masters recommend that the federal judge dismiss those complaints, basically because they have little to do with the rate-making structure.

Yet there may well be merit to Fredericks' complaints. If so, a new kind of water board is the proper agency to take them up.

But it looks as if we're not going to get a new water board for awhile.



At today's camps, kids can specialize

When we were kids, about this time of year we would make a final decision on where we were going to go to camp for the summer.

It was not always an easy decision, although camps seemed to be pretty much alike, with horseback riding, swimming, riflery and campfires. The important ingredient each year was where your friends were going to go to camp. If your best friends were different this year from last year, chances are you'd try a new camp.

Today camp is different. Most of the old-time camps are gone except for those camps designed to take the inner city kids into the countryside.

Today is the day of specialization.

SUPPOSE YOUR child loves soccer. Then he has to go to soccer camp or he won't make the team next year. Besides, as part of the registration, he'll get his own soccer ball. If he goes to soccer camp a couple years in a row, pretty soon you have a basement full of soccer balls.

For those children who want to make one of the other teams, there is now lacrosse camp, field hockey camp, tennis camp, skiing camp, canoe camp, mountain climbing camp, basketball camp, swimming camp, horseback riding camp, and what-have-you.

If your child is not athletically inclined, there is theater camp, language camp, science camp, writers' camp or music camp.

If your child prefers music, it is advisable for you to encourage the flute or clarinet, because tubas and bass violas are not easy to get on the bus, or if a plane becomes necessary, the instrument may mean an extra seat and fare.

All you have to do is buy the latest issue of one of the national women's magazines and you'll find pages and pages of camps available.

There is even a diet camp if your youngster is carrying too many pounds.

WHERE YOU GO to camp has changed, too. In the old days, a bus picked you up locally and carted you off after mom and dad supplied you with a summer's supply of candy and comic books. These usually didn't last the length of the bus-trip to camp.

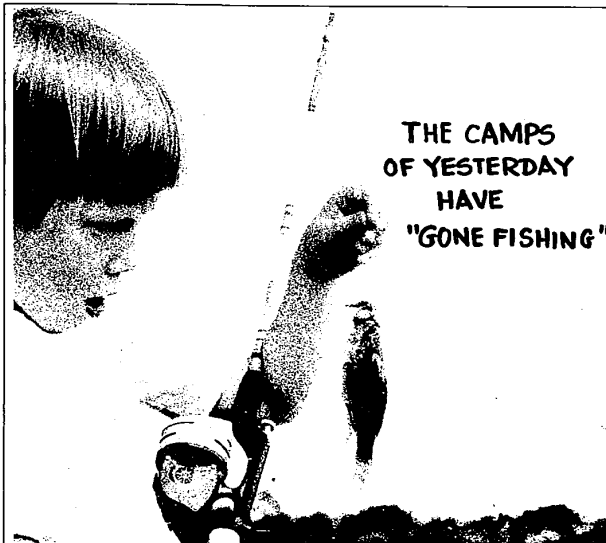
Today campers seem to have to fly to wherever they're going. Of course, it is hard to mountain climb in Oakland or Wayne counties, but why do you have to go to Lake Tahoe for tennis?

The change in the type of camps is indicative of what is happening to our youngsters. It is no longer important to be a generalist or a jack-of-all-trades. It has now become important to be good at something.

When they get older, they'll have a skill of which they can be proud, but they end up taking themselves too seriously when they are young.

When they get to middle age, they probably can look back at their video tapes of their foreheads or backhands, or the trophies or ribbons they've won, but will they know the words to the old songs or have the memories of a campfire at twilight?

Change is with us, but it's not necessarily all good.



The Indians had a word for it. And the word was "Woonsocket."

While pop star Cat Stevens lamented that he was being followed by a moonshadow, the people moving into Canton's Wilshire subdivision complain that they're being preceded by a Woonsocket.

What kind of person, asks Gerald Parent, wants to tell his family and friends to visit him at his new address on Woonsocket?

A better name, said Parent, would be the staid, Anglo-Saxon name of "Windsor." Parent produced the signatures of nine other new home buyers on the street who want Woonsocket scratched in favor of Windsor.

Such a pity.

Now, it has not often been the policy of this reporter to take the side of the developer. In this case, however, I wholeheartedly commend Republic Developers for deciding to name the new street "Woonsocket" after the Rhode Island city. The name comes from the native population's word for the town's earliest landmark, a waterfall. The literal translation is "thundering mist."

UNDOUBTEDLY the developer's intentions were not entirely poetic. He probably thought the word "Woonsocket" would be greeted by buyers as a name with rich—and marketable—New England charm.

Not so, said Parent and fellow petitioners. To them, Woonsocket is a fun-sounding name that evokes derivative laughter from old friends.

But is that reason enough to change Woonsocket to Windsor? I think not.

If merely thinking a street name sounds funny were reason enough to change it to something more fashionable, we'd be a duller world today.

We'd drive north to 15 Mile Road, instead of the inimitable Big Beaver Road.

Street names—especially new ones in subdivisions—have become unbearably predictable. They all sound like foggy settings in a Gothic novel: Stréwsbury, Nottingham, Yorkshire, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Hillary, Gloucester, Edmonton, Barchester, Manchester and a few other Limey names that escape me.

For some reason we still cling to a colonial concept that glorifies anything that evokes an Olde English image. Yuck.

"Olde English names meet with public favor," said Richard Lewiston, president of Practical Homebuilders. "People like it, and like anything else in this business you give the public what it demands."

If England was so hot, why did the colonists decide to travel in sleazebags to make a new life in America? Surely not to build a new continent that puts a premium on "king-size" products and "royal treatment."

sauce but it's a pretty unimaginative name for a street. Why not name streets that give a hint to the history of an area or at least sound distinctive, as opposed to distinguished?

Woonsocket is all that and more.

Windsor, the people's choice, is just another English veneer.

Therefore, let it be hereby decreed that henceforth no street shall carry the nom de plume of the Mother Country. If we don't take action right now nothing will stop the Duke of Earl.

In its place we could enact an affirmative action plan to elevate the social standing of other ethnic names.

How does "Kowalski Court" sound? Or maybe "Pittiglio Place?"

The point of this impassioned plea is that while roads with names such as McClumpha may not sound suave they are a helluva lot more acceptable than "Prestige Heights," the actual name of one Canton Township subdivision.

Under my edict, residents who live on streets bearing out-of-the-ordinary names would normally never be able to change them. Don't grieve, for one thing it will make it easier to find addresses. If you've ever driven to a Manchester Drive instead of a Barchester Drive you'll thank me.

BUT EVERY steadfast rule has its exception and this is no exception.

Last month a group of people planning to move into Beacon Hill subdivision in Plymouth Township approached the township board of trustees with a righteous protest.

"They didn't want to live on 'Tinkerbell' street. 'I've had people laugh when I tell them the street I'm planning to move to,' said Lorna Lafka of Westland (and please don't laugh at her name). 'They just come right out and laugh.'"

Mrs. Lafka has a point. I hate to think of the abuse any child from Tinkerbell street would get from his classmates.

But the name they've picked to replace Tinkerbell is not much better. They want to change it to "Hillside." Yawn.

If it's not Nottingham or Windsor, most people want a street name that denotes elevation or tells lies about the topography of the area.

Prestige Heights is on a flat plain that flooded badly this spring. Predominant patches of over-fertilized brown sod can be found on streets with monikers like "Green Meadows Drive."

And while it could be argued that there are no waterfalls in the Canton Township subdivision to warrant the Indian handle, "Woonsocket," I still say it's a bloody better name than the WASP-ish "Windsor."

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WORCESTERSHIRE may be a fine name for a steak