

## Opinion

Steve Barnaby editor/477-5450

33203 Grand River Ave./Farmington, MI 48024

Philip Power chairman of the board  
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 Dick Isaham general manager  
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 Fred Wright circulation director

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# It's weak but it's law: Wear your seat belt

LET THOSE who ride decide, motorcyclists opposed to wearing helmets tell us.

As far as I know, the opposition to Michigan's watered-down seat belt law, which goes into effect July 1, hasn't come up with a slogan that captures their sentiment. But I suspect it would be in the same vein as the bikers'.

Unless you've had a lobotomy in the past year, you're aware of the Big Brother accusations hurled at the Michigan Legislature for passing even its toothless law.

NEXT MONTH, only drivers stopped for a primary traffic offense will be scrutinized for seatbelt usage. In other words, if you're a pretty good driver who doesn't speed, run red lights or ignore traffic signs, you probably don't have to worry about buckling up. Unless you're involved in a collision.

In each of the last few years, the U.S. has averaged about 40,000 traffic deaths. Three times as many die on our highways as are murdered, and car usage continues to climb.

Eighty percent of U.S. travel is logged in cars. It's estimated that 10,000 lives could be saved annually if all drivers were belted.

I know well the feeble arguments against wearing belts — that the government doesn't have the right to tell us what to do, that a seatbelt might trap us, preventing escape from fire or drowning, that seatbelts are uncomfortable, that so-and-so wore a belt and it didn't protect him. I even heard one person say she won't wear a seatbelt because it wrinkles her clothing.

ISN'T IT CURIOUS that these same folks who are so adamant about their "right" not to wear a seatbelt in their cars utter nary a word when they board a plane?

Yet statistics tell us that commercial



Marilyn Fitchett

air travel is many times safer than that by car. The airlines have a 0.4-per-billion-passenger-mile fatality rate compared to 13.3 for autos. Of all means of passenger traffic, only private and corporate aircraft have a higher fatality rate than do autos.

But there's another side to the seatbelt story that neither statistics nor seatbelt detractors address. And that's the social cost of car accidents that kill or seriously injure.

Who pays for the extended hospitalization and rehabilitation of victims? Who pays for the loss of income and support of a family when the family breadwinner dies or is incapacitated?

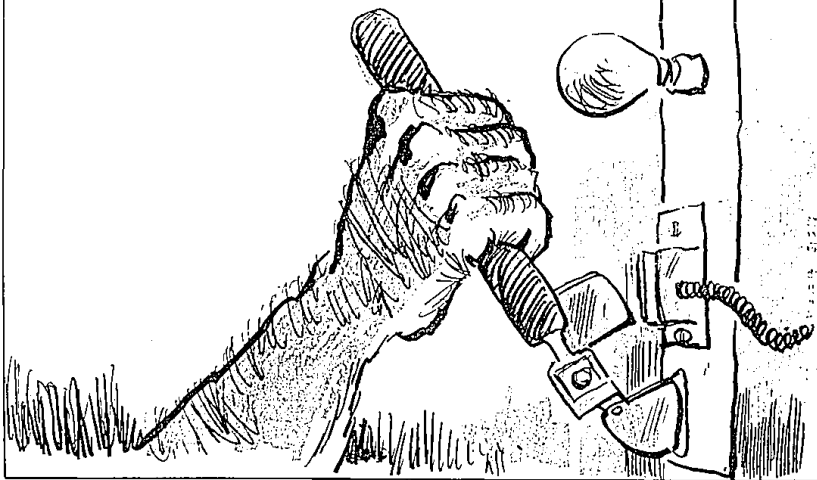
We all do. We pay with higher medical insurance, and we pay with higher taxes when entitlement programs such as Social Security run dry.

WHAT WE CAN'T measure are the emotional losses chalked up when a loved one is hurt or dies. Or the effect losing a parent has on a child. Or the sense of guilt a surviving driver feels knowing his insistence on buckling up could have saved his passenger from being thrown from the car.

If trumpets herald great news, let's break out the kazooes come July 1. Although the state's lawmakers didn't rise to the occasion and pass a strong seatbelt law, it's a small step forward.

Maybe in a few years the state won't have to mandate our personal safety.

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 COLUMBIAN & BLOOMINGDALE  
 NEWS-PAPERS



## Down with death penalty

IF STATE Sen. Kirby Holmes, R-Utica, is correct, Michigan voters will have the chance to decide in November 1986 whether they want the state to be in the business of executing people.

Holmes, sponsor of an unsuccessful legislative effort to put the question on the ballot, says he is confident that a petition drive will succeed in putting the question on the '86 ballot.

The petition drive, spearheaded by Oakland County Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson, is aimed at getting the 301,000 signatures necessary to put a constitutional amendment before voters.

With at least a third of the signatures already in, death penalty proponents figure they will reach the requisite figure in time. Two previous drives by Patterson fell short.

MICHIGAN WAS the first jurisdiction in the English-speaking world to prohibit capital punishment more than 100 years ago after an execution which left many convinced that an innocent man had been hanged.

There has been little said, done or proved in the last 100 years that would indicate that capital punishment should be reinstated.

Proponents of capital punishment say it would be used only in cases of first-degree murder. Mostly that would mean homicides where premeditation is in-



Bob Wisler

volved. It would also mean persons convicted of homicide while committing a felony.

Death penalty advocates suggest that the only ones to suffer under such sentencing would be those who truly deserve to die because of their heinous crimes.

APPARENTLY THIS is a popular belief. Both the advocates and the opponents say public opinion polls show at least 70 percent favor the death penalty.

But those who are asked a simple question about whether they favor capital punishment are seldom given any accompanying information which would show that the death penalty is ineffective as a deterrent to crime.

Most studies show that capital punishment does nothing to deter homicides. Even capital punishment advocates will admit that the death penalty has been of little value in stopping murders or other crimes.

The simple fact is that people who kill rarely reflect on the consequences. And those who do seldom believe they will be caught.

Patterson, in his standard speech for capital punishment, doesn't make great claims for the deterrent value of the death penalty. His chief argument is that it is an "appropriate" penalty for first-degree murder.

TO SHOW THAT life is sacred, the proponents say, we must be able to demand the ultimate sacrifice from those who profane its sanctity.

It is basically an argument for revenge, for getting even, for somehow giving a murder victim's survivors the idea that somehow the scales have been balanced, one life for another.

It gives the people of a state the false notion that something final is being done about a certain kind of crime, that the guilty are being held accountable by having their lives brought to an end in some unequivocal and awesome sense of justice.

Such a notion will not satisfy for long, for there will be new crimes and new outrages despite the death penalty. In the process, the state and its people become a perceptible amount less humane.

Retribution is a business that should be reserved for a higher power than state government. It is a business the state would do well to stay out of. The recent decision of the state Senate to turn down a proposal to put the death penalty on the ballot should be admired.

## from our readers

### Story helps find her mom

To the editor:

I am writing you this letter in response to an article that appeared in The Farmington Observer titled "Remembering Shep: a political buddy." When I read this article I cried a long time; as you read my letter you will understand.

Back in the early '50s, when I was a small child, I lived in Farmington. I was taken to see a man who owned a store there and he would give me candy from his pocket. This took place before I was 6 years old. A couple of years after that I was adopted and was moved out of the Farmington area. I was adopted three times before the age of 16 and have been married and divorced twice. Through all of that my name had been changed six times, including my first name which was changed when I was 8. I have also lived from California to Florida.

Then last year, just before Christmas, I received your article in the mail. It was sent to me by a relative that lives in Farmington, who I haven't seen since I was a teen-ager. I read the article several times and kept it several months but since I didn't know the person it was written about I finally threw it away.

Several months after that I got a phone call from an aunt who said that her cousin had contacted her and wanted to know if I had gotten the article. After I told her what had happened, she proceeded to tell me what the article was about. Her cousin had been with me when I was taken to the store to see the man who was my grandfather. She remembered the visits and she thought all these years that I had known him and was sending the article for me to have as a remembrance of him. The last lines from a recent letter from her said, "If I had only known about your long search, I would have gone to see your Grandfather. I have always known he was your Grandfather and just assumed you did too." I have since found out that I was his only granddaughter and the oldest of three grandchildren by his daughter.

My aunt also told me that there was another article in your newspaper titled, "Hidden Past: Unveiled After Death of Renowned City Council Watcher." In this article was the name of Linton Shepard's only child, his daughter and my natural mother. I never knew anyone on my mother's side of the family so when I wrote to newspapers and to television shows to help me find my mother, all I had was the information

from my birth certificate. After years of searching, I came up with nothing and had to give up. Thanks to your paper and to the relative who lives in Farmington that sent me the article about my family, I am now corresponding with my mother, whom I have not seen in 32 years.

I have also received another copy of your article and have read it several times and cried. I cried because I didn't get to know or learn to love the Grandfather I had longed to see for so many years. I also cried because I have newspaper clippings instead of fond memories of my Grandfather. But I am so thankful to you Mr. Barnaby, for your article about my Grandfather. I will cherish it because it tells me about a wonderful man, my Grandfather, Linton Shepard.

So thanks to all of you for the articles that helped me find my other family. Words cannot express how I felt when I went to pick out a card to send to my mother on Mother's Day this year. The mother I haven't seen in 32 years but will be seeing soon.

Karen Cantrell  
 Tallahassee, Fla.

## discover Michigan

Once elected, Michigan's governor can choose to vacate his office at will, but there are only two legal methods of removing a governor against his will — a recall election, or a determination by the majority of the state supreme court that the governor is unable to govern.

The state Constitution says a determination request to the Supreme Court must be made by the president pro tempore of the Senate "and" the speaker of the House of Representatives.

The high court is charged with determining not only if an inability to govern exists but "if and when the inability ceases." Such determination "shall be final and conclusive," the constitution says.

The rules of succession call for the Lt. Governor to succeed the governor followed by the elected Secretary of State and the elected Attorney General.

SOMEWHERE IN a Michigan history book, I read a story about the early politics of statehood. The major institutions were to be divided among the major towns.

Kalamazoo drew the insane asylum, as it was then called. Marshall was to be state capital. Jackson and Ann Arbor were to choose between the prison and the university.

Jackson won and elected the prison, figuring it would provide more jobs than a university.

LAST WEEK the folks around Jackson were raising Cain with their state officials because 52 of the 800 or so inmates in minimum security have escaped this year, but only 16 have been caught. A suburban husband and wife were stabbed to death in their homes, and an escapee is suspected.

Last week, Gov. James J. Blanchard signed a bill authorizing a state prison in the former Detroit House of Correction, actually located in Plymouth Township. Plymouth and Northville townships have about three prison sites, a mental hospital and other institutions.

So terribly unhappy are the local politicians that they openly mutter about running someone against Sen. Bob Geake, R-Northville, in the next GOP primary on the theory they need more political muscle to stop being used as a "dumping ground."



Tim Richard

Also last week, the Oakland County Board of Commissioners flexed its political savvy and refused to take a stand on where a state prison should be built.

The Pontiac folks and the mental health constituency would be sore if they opted for the Clinton Valley Center site.

The economic developers would be sore if they opted for Auburn Hills near the high-tech park. So the commissioners voted 18-9 to dump the decision back in the laps of Blanchard and the state Corrections Department.

WHAT HAPPENED in the last 149 years to make prisons so unpopular?

Michigan's official policy has changed. Once prisons were viewed as a place for punishment.

Today, as the title implies, the Corrections Department's official policy is one of rehabilitating those who have committed felonies. Except for the fencing, a new "prototype" prison in Muskegon County is more like a college dormitory than a place of punishment.

The policy of rehabilitation is out of

tune with public sentiment. The public wants criminals locked up good and tight.

Indeed, much of the sentiment for the death penalty is probably due to the fact that so many prisoners escape, are released too early or receive too short sentences.

WHAT, SHORT of cutting off the hands of burglars and mutilating rapists, will actually make convicts safe to return to society?

Jesse Pitts, Oakland University sociologist and criminal justice professor, put it rather succinctly in a series he wrote for us several years ago. In a nutshell, he thought all the theories were poppycock and that only two things would straighten out a convict:

• Age. Young men have a certain amount of chemical hell in their systems. As times pass, all but the worst grow out of it.

• The love of a woman. A parolee who fears losing his woman if he's sent back to prison has a powerful motivation to follow the straight road.

My own thought is that prisons should be on islands in the Great Lakes, and that ice-breaking ships should keep the water open in winter.

Trouble is, rich folks — and even the governor — have palatial homes on those islands, so developers would fight my plan.