

# Hills leader reflects on city's growth

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THE SAME drive for challenge and problem-solving that carried McConnell through the growing years of cityhood enticed him to put his education to use for the auto industry rather than for clothing and other textile uses.

"It is more challenging, it's more demanding than fads (in fashion). There's more substance to it. And there's more depth in the color and color relationships as well as the design. Actually, there's more to the interiors of cars than meets the eye," he said.

After 11 years with Ford Motor Co. as a senior research engineer, McConnell and a friend formed their own consulting and engineering firm — MCPG Sales Inc. in Troy — and later branched out into sales.

Restrained in talking about himself, his family and his career, McConnell takes a different approach when it comes to discussing his recollections of Farmington Hills' early years.

When McConnell first moved from northwest Detroit to what was then Farmington Township in 1965, the greatest threat was an effort to build a stadium on 11 Mile. Yet McConnell was already beginning to perceive the problems with a township form of government, particularly when it came to getting Oakland County to do something with the roads.

While a good majority of the city's current leaders found their political roots in neighborhood associations, McConnell's beginnings were similar. A member of the First Presbyterian Church in Farmington Hills, McConnell said it was there that he and others first talked of leadership and cityhood.

**CONCERNED ABOUT** the possibility of a stadium on their door step, McConnell and Councilman Ben Marks got together and formed a comprehensive homeowners council in an effort to gather clout to defeat the stadium proposal.

"There was a major need to reorganize the government to meet the needs of a growing community," McConnell said. "In the 1960 census, there were 25,000 people (in the township). That doubled in 1970. That was the problem. The major issue was the lack of attention by Oakland County to the road system."

As McConnell's interest in working to create a more functional type of government for his community was growing, he went back to school and

graduated with a master's degree in administration and organization. Yet ask McConnell about his political career and it's not so much his personal political successes he'll discuss, but the highlights of Farmington Hills' growth as a successful incorporation move, the push for a city charter and the establishment of a professional city administration.

Following McConnell's successful rushed drive to Lansing with the incorporation petition in hand, he concerned himself with the business of creating a government and city charter that the community could rally around.

The presentation of a three-cornered hat — reminiscent of the early colonists — to McConnell as the township was crowned a city captured the spirit of the moment he had worked to achieve.

**THROUGHOUT** his political career, McConnell has been known as one who could take controversial issues and pull warring factions into compromise. Convinced the city could be better run by professionals, he served as the township's last supervisor and, in turn, abolished the post as the then-newly created charter commission laid down the city's bylaws.

"I guess I was really responsible for ramrodding it through," said McConnell, commission chairman. "We put together a charter in 11 months. I was instrumental in setting that limit of 10 mills (charter tax limit). It was needed to make the charter fly."

Ask McConnell about the difficulties of bringing old and new ideas together — and the politics behind creating a city — and he just smiles, followed

quickly by a chuckle and whispered anecdotes.

"I look at politics as the fabric of getting things done," he said. "A lot of people get sidetracked with petty politics. But you have to have the goals, objectives there. That's where true leadership comes in."

And McConnell seems to have followed his own prescription for leadership. Following the city's inauguration on July 1, 1973, McConnell made a successful bid to serve on the city's first council.

**HIS NEWLY** elected council colleagues also elected him the city's first mayor.

"It was a vote of confidence and support for turning the city around. The significant thing was that as township supervisor, I was able to gradually mold and shape the transition to cityhood. And as a result, that transition

was quite smooth," he said.

Immediately, McConnell and the council worked to fulfill his early notion that Farmington Hills needed professional management. That led to a talent search for the city's first manager — George Majors. "After that, everything fell into place," McConnell said.

But McConnell still had notions about what would make the city successful. One thing that he is still involved with is the effort to boost the city's tax base so residents won't be forced to pay high taxes some day.

As township supervisor, McConnell formed the Industrial Tax Commission with former mayor Fred Lichtman as chairman. "I set the precedent for one-year terms for mayor. I resigned. Fred became mayor and I took the leadership of the industrial commission," he said.

**McCONNELL'S LOVE** for Farmington Hills led him to step out of the local political scene and enter Oakland County politics to ensure that the newly formed city was well-represented.

"I sought election to the county commission because there were problems with the county in communications. It was a matter of getting a major voice. The needs of our community were not being addressed," he said.

In 1976, McConnell was elected Oakland County commissioner for the 25th district. In the middle of his second term, he resigned his commissioner's seat for business reasons. Although it may have appeared McConnell was leaving the political and civic world behind, McConnell, still interested in the city's tax base, traded in his role on the city's industrial commission for the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) when it formed in 1979.

## Payments are made

Partial payment to the Farmington park contractor and purchase of a new Department of Public Safety vehicle were authorized Dec. 16 by the Farmington City Council.

A \$47,981 payment was approved for Armstrong Lawn & Tree Inc. of Sterling Heights, contracted for 1985 park projects. Five percent of the total bill was withheld pending completion of contracted park work. The dollars represent work completed through Nov. 27, according to a report from Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman.

Completed work included removal of brush, removal of existing baseball backstops and fences, and installation of a portion of the material infields and jogging track. Deadman said. Also installed were backstops and chain-link fence for new baseball diamonds and the base material for the parking lots.

Weather permitting, park baseball diamonds will be ready for play in mid-April, he said. Parking lots will be constructed "as soon as the asphalt plants are open in the spring of 1986," he added.

Payment for the project was divided between the city's general fund and the State of Michigan Land and Water Conservation Fund, according to the report.

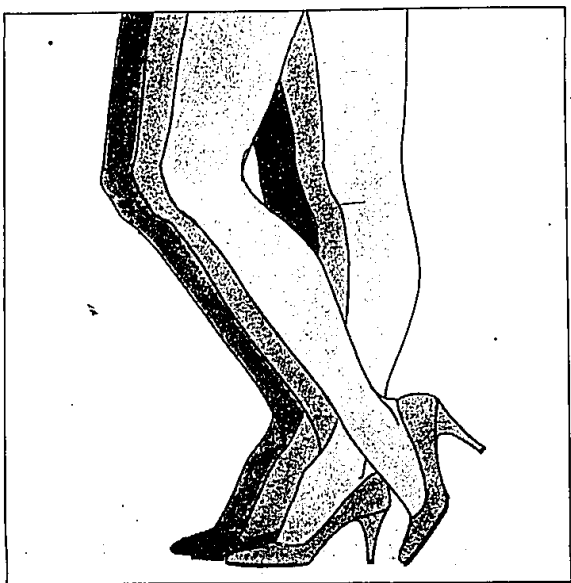
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