

They care Grass-roots bid pays off

HOT-HEADED they're not. They care. And their concern will help enable Farmington Hills to continue to be a good place to raise a family.

United by a common cause, members of Citizens for a Decent Community are staunch believers in the time-tested philosophy that government is only as responsive as you help make it.

So they set out to keep tabs on the quality of life in their upwardly mobile community through grass-roots organizing.

After raiding five Oriental health spas last fall, Farmington Hills undercover officers charged 17 Asian-born people with illegal sexual activity and ticketed seven male customers for loitering in a place of illegal occupation.

Shortly after, Citizens for a Decent Community sparkplug Sharon Chilton, 35, and her two children walked door to door to distribute 1,000 handbills urging city residents to unite against the alleged prostitution at the storefront spas.

SEVEN of the Asian-born people have pleaded no contest to soliciting-related charges — a testament to the strength of the police evidence against them. Other trials are pending.

The last spa, Tokyo, closed March 10 — the day Farmington Hills' tough new message regulation ordinance took effect. It reopened four days later — under a cloud of controversy — pending review of its forced shutdown.

The controversy was precipitated by City Attorney Paul Bibeau's unexpected decision to permit the reopening pending the review — a decision that took even the police department by surprise. Clearly, a public explanation should have accompanied Bibeau's decision.

From the start, the intent of Citizens for a Decent Community has been simple enough: to open and maintain a dialogue with city leaders so homeowner needs aren't lost in the shuffle of municipal business.

Remember: It's one thing to unite energies for a common cause. Having the will and vigor to sustain that unity, however, is something entirely different.

BUT SUCH unity can breed excess. A case in point: The group's decision to buy-

'We've thought right along the (Asian) women were victims, as was our community.'

— Sharon Chilton
Citizens for a Decent Community

cott businesses in the shopping centers housing the Kelko and Kim's spas — in an effort to prompt shopkeepers to encourage their landlords to evict the spas — was excessive. In effect, the boycott held an innocent segment of the community responsible.

Meanwhile, Citizens for a Decent Community couldn't possibly have known its effort would end up paralleling an international probe into whether five local spas were involved in an Asian-based prostitution conspiracy.

Lost in the media blitz of that conspiracy were the real victims — the Asian women who were arrested. Many speak in halting English and have only a vague understanding of the American way of life.

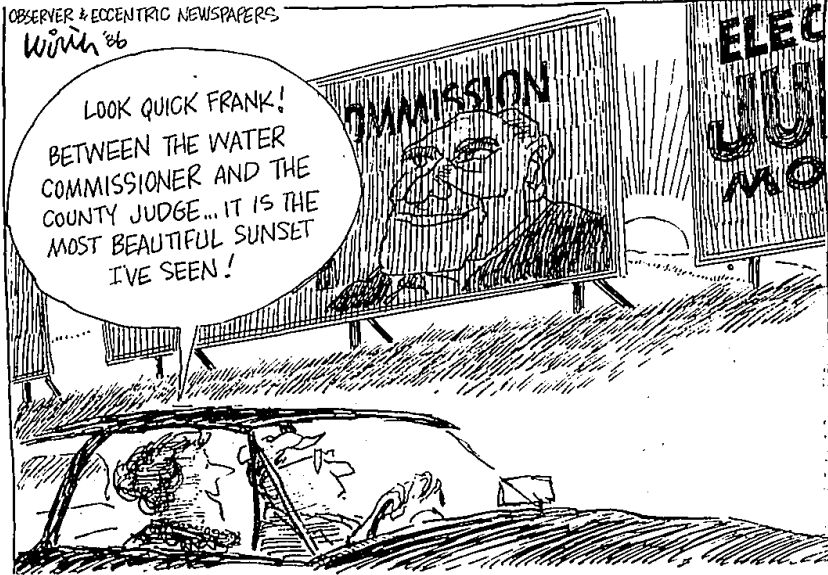
To its credit, Korean-American Community Services has reached out in hopes of helping turn around the women's twisted lives.

IN SENTENCING the women who pleaded no contest, District Judge Margaret Schaeffer of Farmington wisely recognized the value of professional help by suspending jail terms in favor of counseling and probation.

The fear of prison, deportation, even death, has kept the women from complaining about mistreatment, say investigators. Says Chilton: "We've thought right along the women were victims, as was our community. That's why, early on, we contacted the Korean (Presbyterian) Church in Southfield to see if it could do something."

Make no mistake: These women came to America looking for a better life. But they unwittingly became caught in a web of intrigue while trying to achieve something Americans take for granted — freedom.

— Bob Sklar



Put billboards out to pasture

YOU'VE JUST spent a pleasant evening in Ann Arbor and are driving home, east on I-94. It's dark and quiet when you round the bend and — see god! the Marlboro man gallops out in front of you.

You were thinking about the friends you had just dined with. He wants you to think cigarettes. He's bigger, so he wins.

Is there no relief from billboard mania? The galloping cowboy may be the most obnoxious billboard around, but many others aren't much more attractive.

Who wants to look at a local television station's news team sprouting from the top of a building? Don't we see enough of them every day? And how many times do you have to be reminded that the Golden Arches has an outlet ahead?

THE CLUTTER of billboards along highways wending through our cities is disruptive enough — some even argue they distract drivers to the point of being dangerous.

But they are more annoying when driving through the rural stretches in Michigan. Just as you are reflecting on the rolling terrain and trees in their most beautiful autumn colors, a huge sign pops out in front boasting that the world's largest collection of seashells is ahead — or that you can buy sweaters at bargain prices nearby.



Kathleen Moran

Aren't there sufficient means for advertising — newspapers, television, radio, direct mail supplements, coupon books?

DO WE have to stand for this? If the billboard companies have their way, we will. Ever since the Supreme Court struck down a California law that prohibited billboards, some billboard companies have been on the muscle.

The largest of those, Gannett Outdoor Co., is picking off one community after another — challenging the various local ordinances that restrict the size and location of billboards. Gannett thinks 300-square-foot signs placed 200 feet from the right-of-way and spaced 1,000 feet apart are inadequate.

So the billboard giant took Troy to court. Unfortunately, National Advertising took Troy to court at the same time and the worst possible scenario happened — the two Oakland County circuit judges issued conflicting decisions.

One found the ordinance constitutional but too restrictive, the other ruled Troy's ordinance unconstitutional. One case is on appeal, the other may be headed there.

IN ORTONVILLE, Gannett erected a sign without obtaining the permits first. If the company was betting on that small community being unable to afford a court battle, it bet wrong. That case is now headed for mediation — and if that doesn't work, a trial will follow.

Gannett has been fighting local laws in Auburn Hills, Westland, Dearborn Heights, Roseville and other area towns.

But not every little town along an expressway has the resources to fight — and the courts are more interested in the "freedom of speech" issue than whether billboards cause sign pollution.

So where does that leave us? It's unlikely that a total statewide ban of billboards would withstand a legal battle. So consumers should take the matter in their own hands.

Let the advertisers know you don't like being assaulted by billboards that loudly proclaim their products. Don't vote for candidates whose campaign sign blocks your view of the sunset. And let the billboard companies know that bigger isn't always better.

Campaigns need public support



Bob Wisler

influence far beyond that which is healthy.

One reason the subject has come up is the resentment over GOP gubernatorial candidate Dick Chrysler's recent outpouring of political advertising. Chrysler spent more than \$400,000 running a political ad on television that has done much to enhance his possibilities as a gubernatorial candidate.

Chrysler no doubt will exceed the spending limits called for in the state campaign financing act. He has the resources to finance his campaign himself and has eschewed the use of public funds. Those candidates who avail themselves of public funds must stick to spending limits of \$50,000 in a primary campaign and \$1.2 million in a general election campaign.

THERE HAVE been cries about candidates who try to "buy" elections. Chrysler pointed out, however, that it is extremely unlikely that anyone can "buy" an election for governor by massive spending and this premise sells short the public's ability to determine the kind of candidate it wants

to occupy a particular public office.

But there is no doubt that raising the limits that a gubernatorial candidate can spend would put the candidates on more equal footing in their efforts to carry their message to the voters.

Unfortunately, it is a fact of life that being elected to a high public office such as governor or U.S. senator involves spending massive amounts of money on political advertising.

The days when the public got most of its information through newspaper accounts of a candidate's public appearances and statements are over. There is no way a candidate can make enough public appearances to allow the majority of voters to get a firsthand look at a candidate.

THE CANDIDATES do their best in every conceivable fashion to get their messages to the voters, but in the final analysis it is often advertising, particularly television advertising, which determines the winners and losers. It is unfortunate because the limitations of 30-second commercials preclude a detailed examination of issues, concerns and ideas and the commercials too often rely on slickness, gimmickry and appeals to emotion rather than reason. But this is the way it is.

The costs of such campaigns have gone up and raising the limit from \$1.2 million in a general campaign to \$2 million is probably in keeping with the rise in actual costs to conduct campaigns.

Schoolcraft College merits tax boost

SCHOOLCRAFT COLLEGE Trustee Paul Kadish said it best:

"We've been scrimping and saving. Granted, there have been SEV (property valuation) increases, but costs have risen faster."

That, in a nutshell, is why voters should say yes Monday, March 24, to the community college's request for a half-mill increase in the property tax rate. Schoolcraft has been under-funded for more than a decade.

The Schoolcraft district covers the southeast corner of Farmington Hills; a northwestern sliver of Redford Township; all of Garden City, Livonia, Northville and Plymouth; one-third of Westland; and about two-thirds of Canton Township.

Schoolcraft has scrimped and saved. During its largest program growth years, the 1970s, voters put the brakes on new taxes. A lot of programs are cramped.

SCHOOLCRAFT HAS the tightest ratio of students to square feet of space of Michigan's 29 community colleges, according to a state study.

The recession of 1979-83 had devastating effects. State appropriations, which normally should be one-third of the college's budget, were pared, sliced and then hacked in order to balance the state budget. The college has a lot of "catch up" work to do.

Some of Schoolcraft's buildings are now 20 years old. Ditto with parking lots.

Meanwhile, American industry has leaped into high technology. For the auto companies, it has meant investing billions in computers and robots.

For community colleges, which are Michigan's most important single industrial training ground, it has meant precisely the same thing — more comput-

ers, more computer labs, more word-processing machines.

All that requires capital investment — just like at GM and Ford.

THERE IS a human side to running a community college. Qualified people to teach on the new equipment are few, so the college has been retraining existing faculty. Sometimes, it means matching a grant to send someone to Ferris State College for a summer program. Other times, it means giving an instructor released time to study in industry.

The half mill will add \$1.7 million, or about 9 percent, to the total budget. About 83 percent will go into physical capital; the remaining 17 percent will go into operations.

The burden per homeowner is only \$17.50 a year on a \$70,000 market value house. Schoolcraft taxes don't begin to match the burden of taxation they talk about in Lansing and Washington.

A few critics have raised some fair questions, and there are fair answers.

A special election and a telephone campaign have raised some hackles. As a newspaper, we haven't been entirely pleased by them.

YET, THE political fact of life is that conducting a community college millage election during the regular school campaign in June would absolutely doom the college's chances. Again, college trustees would have been derailed if they hadn't called a special election.

The telephone campaign has kept the issues from being fully discussed in a public setting. Yet, the tactic is entirely legal and common. It shouldn't be an alibi for voting against a proposal with merit.

Schoolcraft's modest millage request deserves voter support next Monday.

— Observer & Eccentric Newspapers