

Pacesetter

Grand Prix's top volunteer is honored

By Susan Steinmueller
staff writer

During the past five years, Robert Pierson has spent a lot of time in the "driver's seat" at the Detroit Grand Prix — not as a driver, but as race chairman.

On July 10, Pierson, an 11-year Farmington Hills resident, was honored for these efforts when he became the first recipient of Detroit's Grand Prix Winner Award. Sponsored by David Wachler & Sons — Detroit-area jewelers — the award honors an individual or group whose outstanding efforts for the Grand Prix would otherwise have gone unrecognized.

Pierson, who is feeling very honored about getting the award, to me the bigger thing is that the Wachlers have recognized the fact that there are a tremendous amount of volunteers who put this race on," Pierson said. "I was very happy that for the first year the award went to the group of the volunteers because they give so much. That's what makes the event a success."

Pierson, 40, became involved with the Grand Prix when, as a member of the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), which organizes the three-day event, he volunteered to help with the first Grand Prix and was asked to chair it.

THE POSITION involves securing and managing hundreds of race volunteers, handling budgets, providing equipment, seeing to meals and facilities for workers, and generally making the three-day event run smoothly. He works closely with promoters, Detroit Renaissance Inc., competitors, and the SCCA's national office.

Much of the challenge of being race chairman lies in dealing with the unexpected during the race itself, Pierson says. He compares it with the story of the boy in the wooden shoes who held his finger in a hole in the dyke to prevent a leak: "It becomes sitting around waiting to see the leak."



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This year, he said, things went "pretty much by the plan." But, when a car crashed in a precarious position, and the crane that was to lift it broke, it was a typical "leak."

"We did a little scrambling here and there," he said. Tens of thousands came to the city for this year's race, and Pierson said: "I would say that this year in all respects is the best race we've had so far. The first couple of years were shaky just because of the enormity of the project. But as each year goes by, you increase your standards of excellence. The Detroit Grand

Prix has in a very short number of years, grown to a world class event."

Volunteers, 900 of whom are organized by the SCCA, deserve much of the credit for the success of the Grand Prix, Pierson said.

"By the time the first engine is started, they have put in tens of thousands of hours. The reason that the event has been successful is that they don't just put hours in — they put in 120 percent. They treat it very professionally."

SCCA Grand Prix volunteers are supervised by chiefs of various specialties. Many are licensed in those specialties.

Turnover of volunteers, who regard the work as a labor of love — has been low, including those among 300 out-of-town volunteers. Many use vacation time to support the race — and they do it all without compensation, Pierson said.

"Doing the race is effectively their ski weekend or their cottage up north," he said.

Pierson himself puts in hours that become round-the-clock as the race nears. Plans are already under way for next year's sixth annual event, which he will again chair.

"I really enjoy the event," he said. "I think it's extremely good for the area, and I'm very happy to be involved with it."

Pierson is general manager of the Unibilt Division and the Webb/Rack Division of the Jervis B. Webb Co., a manufacturer of material handling systems and automation equipment based in Farmington Hills.

He has been a car racing enthusiast since the 1960s and an SCCA member since 1974. Describing himself as a "fair to medium" amateur race car driver, he raced a Corvette at Waterford Hills from 1975 to 1982.

His wife, Patricia, and daughter, Dawn, a recent Albion College graduate, are also active Grand Prix volunteers.

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Pact is ratified

A new contract offering Farmington public services workers a 10.4 percent increase over three years plus improvements in health, call-back and disability provisions was unanimously approved July 7 by the Farmington City Council.

The contract with Local 1456 of the American Federation of State and County Municipal Employees is effective July 1 and will cost the city 4.5 percent more than the previous year's benefits and wage costs, according to City Manager Robert Deadman.

The collective bargaining unit represents 12 city workers.

Negotiations began several months ago, Deadman said, and a tentative contract was reached and ratified by the union membership the previous week.

"We gave some and we lost some," Deadman told the council, which approved the measure without discussion.

"We believe the contract is fair both in light of compensation provided to similar employee classifications in area communities and the city's ability to maintain qualified employees," he added.

ACROSS-THE-BOARD pay increases will be 3.6 percent the first year, followed by 3.5 and 3.3 in the two following contract years. Because of department restructuring done during the past contract, an additional 50 cents per hour was added to the positions of crew chief and mechanic.

Deadman gave the council other contract highlights in his report. Advantageous to both sides is the upgrading of a safety committee composed of city administrators and AFSCME members who will meet monthly to discuss safety concerns on the job.

The program aids the city in reduced workers' compensation claims and allows for a safer work environment for employees, Deadman said. Estimated to cost the city \$2,500 per year is an upgraded call-back provision, similar to the city's current snow-call rule, providing employees with one hour of compensation for each 24-hour period they are called in.

Prompted by a recent accident in which three city public services employees were injured when hit by a car while on the job, the new contract also provides two-year health care benefits for extended disabilities. Two of the injured employees remain away from their jobs, Deadman said.

In addition, vacation leave time was modified, disciplinary language was clarified and medical insurance programs were enhanced in the three-year contract.

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