

Opinion

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Rely on facts, not fears

FEAR AND IGNORANCE often walk hand-in-hand.

In recent weeks, the pair has done its part in igniting and dividing Farmington Hills residents.

The last few weeks have been sparked with controversy. Anger and apprehension have highlighted discussion of the Sisters of Mercy expansion plans, child day care in residential areas and whether a barrier on Tulpwood should continue to separate adjacent neighborhoods.

Each issue has appropriately drawn out the residential troops armed with opinions, feelings and in some cases, facts.

Many residents made strong, compelling and factual arguments in each issue. As many residents came armed with assumptions based on their fears of what might happen if decisions contrary to their feelings were made.

ON THE CHILD day care issue, complaints were numerous. Many telephone callers opposed day care because of unwarranted fears children would bring AIDS into the neighborhood.

Others complained about sanitation — dirty diapers — and other health-related concerns. And even more callers complained about working mothers. "They should stay home," was the common cry.

Opinions of what might happen — rather than actual facts and figures — were similarly offered in the Tulpwood discussion.

The Sisters of Mercy plans drew the usual complaints about increased traffic, sewage problems and the wave of development in the city. Again, not one



Joanne Maliszewski

shred of evidence was offered to support arguments.

IGNORANCE PLAYED as much a role in residents' confusion and anger.

Residents — some here 20 years — were surprisingly misinformed about how the planning commission and city council operate or whether a zoning text amendment is the same as a zoning change.

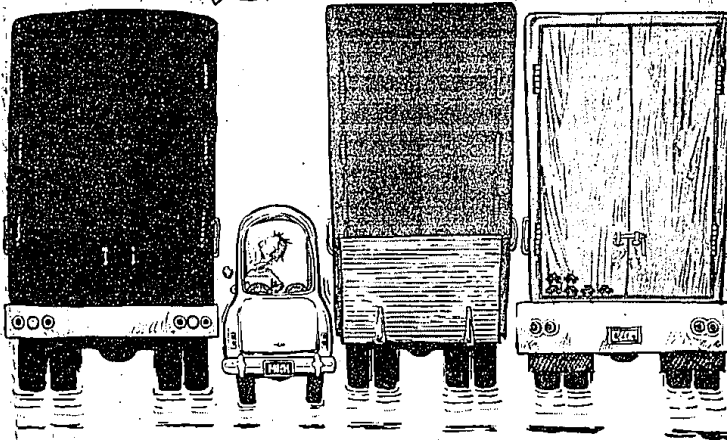
That may be expected from an apathetic community. Only 1 percent of the voters cast ballots in a recent school millage issue.

But if residents understood an issue, let alone how local government works, time and trouble could be saved. Comments could be based on fact rather than fear. And perhaps their feelings would have greater effect on those making decisions if they came from informed opinion. Angry, mud-slinging comments do little to foster credibility.

Yes, change is threatening. But much of it is frightening because it's made to be so much more drastic and devastating than reality proves.

A call to city hall for information, an explanation. A stop at city hall to read the latest proposed ordinances, zoning requests. And even better, regular attendance at council and planning meetings, would go far in fostering informed opinion and debate.

QUIZ: WHERE DOES A 100,000 POUND, 18-WHEEL 'SEMI' DRIVE IN MICHIGAN?



ANSWER--ANYWHERE IT WANTS AND RECENTLY THAT'S BEEN IN THE PASSING LANE "CONSTANTLY"

Explorers: a rare breed

THE SCENE WAS intimidating. About 250 anxious communication hopefuls sat or stood in the conference room of a suburban hotel waiting for words of wisdom to come from a panel of what was billed as "the experts."

We were to address the topic, "Climbing the Communications Ladder."

"What a strange topic," I had told myself weeks earlier. A feeling of discomfort came over me every time I contemplated the subject.

Climbing ladders of any type has always been my least favorite occupation. Vertigo, you know. Remember James Stewart in the bell tower?

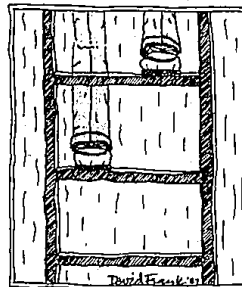
He didn't fall, of course. James never did, in the movies, anyway.

As I sat at the head of that room surveying all the hopes and dreams of the future, I wondered how many of those young careerists would one day find themselves dizzily hanging from a precipice.

FOR THE first time in my life, I was speechless. An unusual occasion, as those who know me will testify. Gazing through my notes, I found the remarks prepared the night before insignificant, the choreographed stories and jokes trivial.

All these people were really serious, really intent on getting on what they perceived was the ladder to success.

Fortunately I was the third of four speakers. I had time to get my thoughts together.

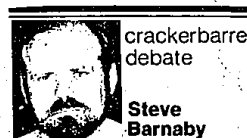


While sitting there I thought about many of the misleading messages that have been sent out to young business people. I call it the MBA mentality. It manufactures robots whose only goals are to get ahead just for the sake of getting ahead, for accumulating wealth just for the sake of overindulgence.

I thought of the increasing number of young Wall Street brokers who are finding themselves in a legal nightmare, ruined for life because of wealth acquired through illegal insider stock trading.

I thought of the image these young people have of business leaders clawing and stomping one another to get ahead.

HOW SAD. They really shouldn't go



crackerbarrel debate

Steve Barnaby

away thinking that was the route to success.

And then I thought about how American business has failed many times in competition with foreign markets because we were more interested in knocking each other's brains out than in producing quality products and competing with them.

To compete, you see, we don't need clone-like business people. We don't want mountain climbers.

We need explorers who are rewarded for innovative ideas, who are passionate about their work and who want to produce the best possible product. We must create an environment where the goal is to work together to create a better society.

I was brought out of my reverie as the moderator made the introduction. I stood for a moment, looking over the sea of faces.

"You don't get ahead by sucking up to your boss."

The audience gasped. I smiled to myself. Thank you, Lord. I was going to get across the message.

Property tax cuts? Get your program

WHEREVER YOU look, someone is offering a plan to cut property taxes. How does Joe Citizen figure out which plan to keep his eye on?

"Right now the focus is on Harden," said Senate Majority Leader John Engler of Mount Pleasant. Edgar Harden is a former university president who has been asked by the state Board of Education to head a 40-member committee to evaluate the plans flying about.

"We are cooperating with Harden. We'll try to use them to develop a consensus. We can't resolve it in the Legislature on partisan lines," said Engler, who has made property tax reform the 1987 issue.

That answers one question: Where in Lansing will state leaders try to address the issue of Michigan's big property tax bills?

WHAT WILL Gov. James J. Blanchard, with his 61-percent mandate from the 1986 election, do?

Blanchard's style is to focus on two or three issues. Property taxes isn't one of them. Blanchard is a follower this time.

His 1985 suggestion was to expand rebates to homeowners with high tax bills — more of what we already have. He would replace the lost revenue with higher business taxes. Republicans won't buy that.

Blanchard is gun shy about tax issues and pessimistic about the chances of passing anything drastic, considering how voters rejected the last reform in 1981. The governor may let a consensus develop and support that.

WHAT WILL be targeted for reform?

Michiganians pay \$5.6 billion in property taxes, two-thirds for school operations. The target will be to reduce school property taxes by half or so.

Where will replacement revenue come from?

A growing feeling is that Michigan's 4-percent sales tax is comparatively low. Tourists help pay sales taxes. So look for a constitutional amendment on



Tim Richard

the ballot with a 1-2-percent increase.

How far will property taxes be cut?

Ah, there's the rub. The GOP Senate plan proposes a level rate for both business and homeowners. A key Democratic plan proposes a higher rate for business. The Democratic theory is that, since reform will shift the tax burden to consumers, business shouldn't get as big a benefit as homeowners.

It's classical Republican vs. Democratic thinking.

WHAT ABOUT those abatements of 50 percent for 12 years that some companies have been getting?

They seemed like a good way to recruit business when the Legislature allowed them. It's becoming more apparent that big companies that don't need them are playing off one community against another.

Look for them to end.

What's in it for so-called "out-of-formula" school districts, which get no state aid? Key question.

Many of those are in these suburbs. When they got state aid, they found the governor could — and did — cut it during a recession in order to pay welfare benefits.

Those districts are sitting pretty, answering only to their local voters at tax election time. They are independent of Lansing.

Why, they will argue, should we support a sales tax increase that Lansing can take away from us? They will need some iron-clad guarantee that shifted taxes won't be taken away.

Any tax relief plan will have to be sold to out-of-formula suburban school districts before it can go on the ballot.

Taking stock in condoms

DON'T YOU THINK the controversy about condoms is being stretched to the limit?

It's all well and good that some people are finally taking AIDS seriously enough to try to protect people from this fatal disease through education. But the arguments springing from this issue are frequently ironic, silly or misleading. Red herrings, you might say, or Trojan horses.

On the ironic side is the fact that some feminists, who have rightfully complained that contraception has been for too long a woman's problem, find themselves criticizing the hypocrisy of television commercials for condoms.

Apparently, they say, it was all right to keep condoms a secret from polite society when the only worries were unwanted pregnancies, something that was somewhat inconceivable for men. But now that there is a deadly disease stalking men, let's get the word out of the pool halls and onto local TV.

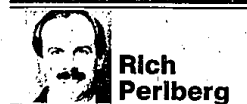
THE RESERVATION OF feminists about condom ads puts them in league with fundamentalists, proving to no one's surprise that condoms make for

strange bedfellows. The fundamentalists, however, don't like condom ads at all. Commercials for condoms don't promote safety, they say, they promote sex. And it's one thing for adults to mess up their lives by being sexually immoral, but children shouldn't be encouraged to do likewise.

That is apparently a reasonable argument for some people, but it ignores the fact that kids in my small rural high school somehow discovered sex, condoms and teenage pregnancies in the mid-'60s without the help of a single sex education class or condom commercial. Unfortunately, those who discovered sex didn't always discover condoms.

It is and will be difficult to prove whether straight talk to students will encourage less teenage sex or, at least, fewer teenage pregnancies. It is also difficult to listen to television executives with a straight face.

THEY GNASHED their teeth and wrinkled their brows over the delicate matters of sex and condoms on television. These are the same people who made "Jiggle television" a code word with shows like "Charley's Angels," who



Rich Perlberg

regularly spice up the "Dallas" genre and various mini series with generous doses of sex and who delight in near-soft-porn made-for-TV movies featuring the rapes of attractive women and teenage girls.

No matter. Television may gently dip its toes into the world of condoms, but the products are already plainly displayed in drug stores in the finest communities. That's true even in the northern Michigan town where, a decade or so ago, a townswoman strongly opposed the introduction of a sex education class in her public school.

"Next thing you know, they'll be bringing in condominiums," she said.

She was right — about both the condoms and the condom. The 'pylax' has been amusing, but commercials for condoms is an idea whose time has arrived.