

Opinion

33203 Grand River/Farmington, MI 48024 Robert Sklar editor/477-5450

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At war Join battle against drug abuse

ILLEGAL DRUGS have always touched off images of a seamy side of life.

But no more. Drug and alcohol abuse is now a part of America's affluent suburban scene. Drug-related crime is escalating with addicts poised to kill, if necessary, in quest of their next fix.

Substance abuse is in our senior highs and middle schools. It's in our homes. It's in our work places. The cash flow seems unending.

Suburbia is a key stop on the South American-based supply route. The demand is unceasing. And drugs are here to stay.

"It's crack cocaine this year. And if we don't make crack, something else will take its place," says James King, a Detroit-based U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent.

Wake up if you're lulled by productive drug laws by DEA agents around the world. Says King, "Despite our record seizures, we're still getting our butt kicked."

SO IT'S none too soon to see the Farmington Hills Police Department, through its newly formed Citizens Crime Prevention Advisory Committee, march boldly into the war against chemical dependency.

Appropriately, they're promoting education, beginning at the elementary school level, to cripple demand for illegal drugs and alcohol. Kids can't learn when they're too high to listen.

During the committee's year-long "Say No To Drugs" drive, all of us will be called on to do battle against substance abuse in our community — police, educators, clergy, civic, business and government leaders, parents, kids.

And we darn well better be ready to bare-knuckle it — and be accountable.

Take it from Michael Flanagan, Farmington deputy superintendent of schools: "We believe the future of this country is at stake. And we don't think that's overstated."

Patience must rule. Overnight results won't be evident.

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But as Martin Krouher, of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, told the Farmington Hills City Council: "If we save one life, one family, then we can say we have been successful."

TIME WILL tell how effective the advisory committee's multifaceted, 19-point action plan to stemming substance abuse is once the hoopla surrounding it fades. It's not clear how the plan will be phased in or what funding sources will be tapped other than money seized in drug raids.

The burden is on the committee to prove the plan is more than lip service.

Still, it's a solid start.

To wage the war, we need parents to screw their heads on straight as role models. We need kids wise to the wily ways of drugs to exert peer pressure. We need treatment and rehabilitation to take a more prominent place in the sun.

We must accept no less than zero tolerance to any kind of substance abuse.

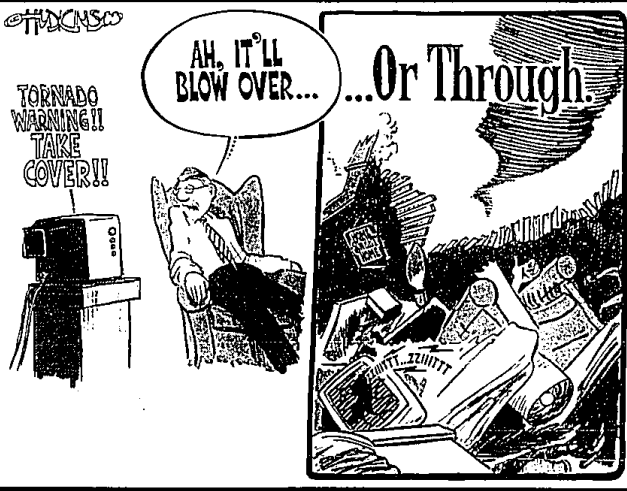
We're excited about Farmington Public Schools' plans to incorporate an understanding of drug abuse and misuse into its health curriculum and to assure training for its classroom and support staff.

IF THERE weren't drug users, there wouldn't be drug dealers. So while tracking and prosecuting drug suppliers, we must treat and rehabilitate drug users.

Whatever the short-term phases, "Say No To Drugs" also must inspire permanent, locally administered substance abuse programs that cross governmental boundaries to succeed.

Drugs know no borders nor socioeconomic bounds. They're the great equalizer.

Abusers are victims, families are victims and the community is a victim. We all suffer — together.



Downtown survival: It's an endless quest

SHOPPERS in downtown Farmington are more apt to drive up in a Ford or a Chevy than a Mercedes or a Rolls.

But don't let the glitter of Worth Avenue in Palm Beach or Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills fool you. Downtown Farmington has plenty to offer, particularly a small-town charm.

This summer, shoppers will begin to see the fruits of a five-year revitalization program that will yield \$1.4 million in streetscape improvements: new sidewalks, new trees, pedestrian lights, more parking. Cooperation has become the buzzword.

"The biggest disadvantage a downtown has is the lack of central ownership," city manager Robert Deadman told a gathering of 150 business, government and civic leaders at the Farmington/Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce State of the Cities breakfast March 17.

"Get into a major shopping center, there's no question about the marketing concept. They may even be driven by the very leases that the people have signed. In a downtown, you have a lot of different owners with a lot of different concepts for how to properly market their types of business."

Somehow, he said, these concepts need to be distilled to benefit individual merchants as well as the central business district.



Bob Sklar

ONE OF the city's best image and spirit builders is Wendy Strip Sittsamer, the Downtown Development Authority's exuberant new executive director.

She credits the DDA with laying the groundwork for an exciting smorgasbord of changes — and rightly so.

"These are people who not only have an interest in downtown, but also earn their livelihood from the downtown," she told the State of the Cities gathering.

"They're merchants and they're business people and they're property owners. And they talk to their neighbors and they know how their neighbors' businesses are doing and they know how their neighbors think."

To help identify downtown Farmington, the DDA has hung 22 festive seasonal banners along Grand River and Farmington Road.

As Strip Sittsamer put it, "They say to the people coming into downtown Farmington that they're entering a unique and identifiable area — an area where excitement is really the key."

THE REAL worth of a DDA lies in how successfully public improvement inspires private investment.

So it's good to hear Strip Sittsamer relate how property owners are "talking about doing things as simple as putting up an awning or a canopy or replacing their sign to sort of spruce up their image."

Some property owners are doing basic things: a fresh coat of paint, new windows and doors, improved entryways.

Others are planning more dramatic projects — building 1,000 square feet of new retail space, or doing complete facade renovations to the front and rear of their property.

Downtown Farmington may be lights years from the dark days of the mid-'70s when the death knell nearly sounded. But not all is rosy.

The retail mix is still lacking. Modern design contrasts with century-old buildings. Team marketing isn't fully developed. Competition for consumer dollars lurks in nearby Farmington Hills, Novi and Livonia.

And an economic downturn could force the improvement train to slam on the brakes.

So amid the resurgence of downtown Farmington, let's never forget the vital work still ahead.

Private jails Bills offer a timely solution

ONLY ONCE in a political lifetime does a sheriff build a new jail.

Think of any recent sheriff — Gribbs, Lucas and Picano in Wayne County; Irons, Spreen and Nichols in Oakland — and none built more than one. Some never built any. None could be called "experienced" in jail building.

Against that historical backdrop, consider the package of 17 bills Sen. R. Robert Geake of Northville is guiding through the state Senate. For the first time in Michigan history, it would allow counties and cities to contract with privately owned and operated jails, paying the company a per diem to house prisoners.

Across the land, several companies are gaining the experience in penal facilities construction, renovation and operation that no single sheriff can match. One firm, Corrections Corp. of America, boasts it has former prison systems directors and assistants from several states on staff.

GEAKE'S BILLS are modest in scope — almost too modest.

Some would amend laws dating back to 1846 by replacing the word "sheriff" with "keeper of the jail." They would make privately owned and operated jails subject to the same requirements as government-owned and operated jails.

So far, debate has focused on county jails, but it's important that some bills would amend the 1909 home rule act and allow cities to hire private jail contractors.

Geake's bills would allow private jails to be used only for convicted misdemeanants — drunks and petty thieves, a low-risk group — not for newly arrested persons or convicts awaiting shipment to Jackson Prison. They would apply only to new jails, not existing ones. Private jails couldn't give prisoners early release. And private jails could be used only when space wasn't available in the government jail. Geake made some big concessions.

When a prisoner escapes a government jail, the sheriff isn't penalized. But if a prisoner escapes a private jail, the company loses money. That's a potent incentive to run a tight ship.

Chief supporters are Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara and Oakland County Executive Dan Murphy, which makes us glad voters opted for the executive form of government.

MICHIGAN IS A follower, not a leader, in this movement.

Businesses own and operate a Pennsylvania delinquent center, a Tennessee prison, a Kentucky medium-security prison, and no less than seven federal immigration detention centers in Texas, California, Nevada and Colorado.

The movement started in the 1980s. So far no government that has tried it has reversed its position. The key point is that if a company jail goes, the government can award its contract to someone else.

Geake's bills are very, very timely. On the de-

Sen. Robert Geake's bills would allow private jails to be used only for convicted misdemeanants — drunks and petty thieves, a low-risk group — not for newly arrested persons or convicts awaiting shipment to Jackson Prison.

mand side, Wayne County's jails are overcrowded, and Michigan is seeing an explosion of people being sent to jail and prison. Every year we hear more and more calls for longer sentences for drunk drivers, drug dealers and the like. When inmates have sued, courts have ordered improved conditions, often at great cost.

On the supply side, government money is in great demand these days. Voters are likely to see ballot proposals for roads in Oakland County, the community college in Wayne County, the state school finance reform proposal with a sales tax hike, a host of local proposals, and the state-paid abortion question.

It makes sense, then, not to strain the bonding and taxing capacity of governments by allowing private capital to do the building job.

THE WHOLE concept of "privatizing," as it's called, bothers some people. It shouldn't.

The mere fact that government is obligated to provide services doesn't mean government politicians and employees must have a monopoly on performing those services. Governments use private contractors as public building custodians, trash haulers, hospital operators, social service providers, road rollers and dozens of other functions.

The chief squawk will come from sheriffs who look upon deputies not only as cops but as a source of campaign help at election time. Wayne County seems to have a highly politicized force, if we may be permitted an understatement.

Disregard those squawks. The top priority should be housing prisoners in new jail space.

GOVERNMENT STILL has a role, even where there are private jails: monitoring their operation, assuring their guards are trained and retrained, requiring adequate liability insurance. Geake's bills force no one to do anything. They give counties and cities alternative tools to practice creative management.

We have one last suggestion of our own: Our leaders should think not only of jails for their own counties and cities, but of forming consortiums — in other words, a tri-county jail and multi-county jails. Oakland's Murphy has proposed this to his brothers in the Big Four. They agreed it was a nifty idea but haven't followed through.

Farmington readers' forum

Letters must be signed, original copies and include the address and telephone number of the writer. None can be returned. Names will be withheld from publication only for sufficient reason. Letters should be limited to 300 words in most cases. We reserve the right to edit them. Send letters to Readers' Forum, Farmington Observer, 33203 Grand River Ave., Farmington 48024.

No sympathy for prisoner

To the editor:

The Farmington Observer reached rock bottom as of March 31. Perhaps your reporter, Janice Brunson, found some sympathy in Jon Vermuelen's "All I do is vegetate" story.

Your reporter apparently feels that Mr. Vermuelen expects some sympathy, from someone, for being imprisoned without trial, after 27 months.

In this story, Mr. Vermuelen admits to being responsible for the death of his pregnant wife. He's now 62 pounds heavier, despite the loss of two thirds of his stomach, and being on a special diet.

This loss of wife and child is clearly tearing him up, but probably not as much as an ordinary man.

Are we the readers, to feel sorry for him? Feel empathy for him? Just exactly, what is the point?

Mr. Editor, please review this story again. Please review the photos.

This is absolutely the most intellectually demanding article I've ever

worthless front-page feature.

The ultimate in disgust is the photo of Jon Vermuelen on Page 6A. Somehow, there is a devilish smirk in the photos "I read twice and am still here to tell about it" satisfaction expression.

It's so very sad one should be, apparently, deprived of due process. Maybe it's better to be deprived of due process, than to die and be processed.

If this is the highlight of the Farmington Observer, then the owner, executive staff, chairman of the board, or photographic engineer need replacing.

I feel more sorry for this paper than I do about Jon Vermuelen. He'll be imprisoned for many years with his own thoughts.

The Farmington Observer chose to print this item for whatever purpose; only your staff will know. Vermuelen's thoughts are personal, the Observer's print is in print forever.

Happy Easter to the Farmington Downtown Development Authority!

E.M. Greenfield, Farmington

seen in this paper, and I know that the Observer can do much better.

V. Ziegler, Farmington Police Officers Association

Why not wait a few days?

To the editor:

I am trying very hard to understand why the Farmington Downtown Development Authority would pick the week before Easter, one of the busiest business weeks of the year, to close the city parking lot at Grand River near Farmington Road for repairs and other work.

We don't question that the work is needed, however, why begin the week of March 28 instead of waiting several more days?

Doesn't anyone do a little thinking before these decisions are made?

Seven days difference would have made many retailers, many shoppers and many residents of Farmington much happier.

Happy Easter to the Farmington Downtown Development Authority!

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