

points of view

# Pay attention to little things downtown

WHEN YOU shine a spotlight on an area, it's bound to show more detail.

Now that the focus is on downtown Farmington, all the "small town" things that may have been previously allowed, or overlooked, shine as bright as daylight.

Things like building facades, who plants flowers in the spring and who is the first to shovel sidewalks in the winter all become apparent as people take a personal pride in their city.

There's also concern about what rules and regulations will guide the city in the future, not just about the ones that guide us today.

Yes, everyone's paying attention to downtown, even during non-Founders Festival times. Nothing can be ignored, because everything is important to the city's aura.

Generally, it makes for a healthier attitude. It makes everyone look at not only their neighbor, but at themselves to be sure they make the grade. And it sets standards a bit higher, forcing people to better themselves.

During such a self-critical period, the question of what is "better" is sometimes debated.

JUST THIS week, the city council heard from Rose Kroll at the Dress



**Casey Hans**

Barn, who wanted permission to display clothing racks on the sidewalk at Grand River and Grove during the warmer months. A small thing you say? Maybe, but to a retailer eyeing the bottom line, such a decision can be important.

It's just those kinds of things I'm

talking about.

Dress Barn district manager Cindy Denmore said in her experience, such displays draw up to 90 percent traffic from the other end of the shopping center. Stores in other, non-downtown locations use this retailing gimmick all the time, she said. In Farmington, they had asked permission to put racks outside several times a month during the warm weather.

In denying permission Monday, Councilwoman Shirley Richardson said such marketing practices "could get entirely out of hand." She thought it would look "degrading" to the downtown.

I tend to agree, especially when we're so conscious about aesthetics. But I would be one of the first shoppers to eye a display like that, and head down the sidewalk to check it out.

THE CITY has an ordinance prohibiting outdoor clothing racks and merchandising, but usually allows it during Founders Festival week. The council plans to make the festival an official exception, but most members don't care for the idea for routine business times.

The ordinance was enacted after a marketing study conducted several years ago, when the recommenda-

tion was made to prohibit such a marketing technique.

The people at the Dress Barn are being good sports about it. Denmore said they were hoping for approval, but she understands the difference between a downtown and a strip mall.

"We're dealing with a downtown," she said. "Our other stores are in discount strip centers - a downtown setting is a totally different thing."

As these small issues come to light, they need to be talked through by all those involved. Because it's these small things that are building blocks for a city - whatever the size.

## How well do we truly know our neighbors?

A MAN DIED in our neighborhood recently. He might have been an older man, but I'm not sure of his age. My wife says she thinks she waved to him once or twice as she took a walk. He lived just across the street and two doors down. I can't say that I ever met him.

I don't think we are unfriendly people, my wife and I. We like to talk and socialize with other folks. We chose our home partly because it looked like it was in a nice neighborhood with the types of people we would like to know.

Our assumption has proved to be true. One neighbor's daughter regularly baby-sits our child. Another, recognizing a mechanical illiterate when he sees one, keeps my lawnmower humming.

BUT AFTER three years in the neighborhood, there are a lot of people we don't know at all and others we know only fleetingly. The schedule is just too crowded. The obligations of no jobs, parenthood, household tasks, civic organizations, family gatherings and previous friendships take their task.

On that rare night when nothing is



**Rich Perlberg**

on the calendar, the thought of exploring the neighborhood takes second place to the chance of enjoying our family and the home we work so hard to maintain.

We are not alone in this. The couple across the street should be our best friends. They moved in at almost the same time as we and their first child arrived six months after ours. We talk and we are cordial, but his work week often includes every weekday and Saturdays. Sundays belong to his family.

We had dinner with them recently and had a grand time. But we met by accident when we randomly arrived at the same restaurant.

THIS IS NOT the way we grew up. I lived in a small northern Michigan town where the people not only knew

each other but often had grown up with each other and usually could walk to work when they chose.

Summer weekends usually turned into neighborhood-wide barbecues. There might have been planning and invitations, but I never was aware of it. It just happened. That was the neighborhood social life.

In my new home, we sometimes have neighborhood meetings and for those who show up, a number of introductions are always necessary.

Imagine that. IT IS not this way everywhere in the land of suburban commuters. I know of many close-knit neighborhoods where they can still spot a strange car the way my mother could as she peered out the kitchen window. "Whose car is that, Ed?" she would ask my dad, and she would warily watch until she was sure no mischief was afoot. There never was.

We were in the kitchen when our baby sitter told us our neighbor had died. He had killed himself. His wife and died several years earlier and speculation was that he was very lonely.

Imagine that.

## Flagpole outranks art in eyes of bureaucrats

IF EVER there was a symbol of the suburban past, it has got to be the farm.

And if ever there was a symbol of the American farm, it has got to be the farmyard gate.

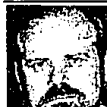
At least this is what sculptor Michael Hall had in mind when he designed "Covington," an art piece that sits in front of an office building on Northwestern Highway.

Hall specializes in art that reflects America's past. But the bureaucratic whiz kids at the Farmington Hills Zoning Board of Appeals have another idea. They call it a structure. Not only is it a structure, they say, it also is a non-conforming structure that has to go.

To add insult to injury, the supervisor of code enforcement says a flagpole or sign would be more suited. But never this structure.

ART APTONADO Gilbert Silverman takes umbrage at this slap aimed at artistic expression. He vows to fight the order in court.

So instead of a farmyard gate, we've come up with a farmgate scandal. Go get 'em, Gill. On the one side we have a renowned artist's work being defended



**Steve Barnaby**

by a horde of art lovers and experts. On the other hand, we have the belligerent bureaucracy defaming a piece of legitimate sculpture, digging in its heels and stubbornly refusing to recognize that art comes in many shapes and sizes.

A few weeks back, Creative Living editor Co Abatt caught my ear as she was working on a piece about this mini tempest. We laughed at the idea that a governmental body would actually waste taxpayers' dollars even debating the issue.

BUT AS we've seen of late, city governments seem to delight in mirroring themselves in trivia. As mentioned last week, in Troy they beef about the Big Boy.

And while it is difficult to get up too much of a head of steam about the Big Boy, it is annoying as hell to

think a local zoning board would choose a flagpole over a piece of art.

Now, it really doesn't matter whether everyone likes it. Most artists' work is maligned at one time or another if it shows even the slightest bit of ingenuity. Remember that the most-visited monument in Washington, D.C., the Vietnam Memorial, was held up to public derision by many.

WHAT MATTERS is that artists are allowed to express themselves without being held up to scrutiny by common part-time volunteer paper chasers.

To be sure, the '80s have been a time of social mediocrity. Few pieces of great art have been produced in any media, be it print, paint or otherwise. Society has put a great bit of importance on conforming and conspicuous consumption.

And to a great extent it has succeeded in suppressing American creativity.

But "Covington" is a demonstration that art survives and survives very well as part of our environment, despite the naysayers. Let the gate stay. And may every flagpole be replaced by a piece of art that's just as good.

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