

points of view

# Challenging public officials to be open

THE STATE Legislature played a nice little trick on the Big Four when it passed the transportation reorganization bill.

The Big Four, you'll recall, are the Oakland and Wayne county executives, the mayor of Detroit and the chairman of the Macomb County board. In recent years, they have come together sporadically, behind closed doors, to pow-wow over major issues affecting the region.

At their request, the Legislature made the Big Four the new Regional Transportation Council, replacing the 15-member board of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority.

Well, the RTC is a public body empowered by state law to exercise governmental authority. It is governed by the Open Meetings Act.

And since the Big Four are the RTC, they come under the Open Meetings Act. It's that simple.

The Open Meetings Act provides only a short list of things that a public body can discuss behind closed doors. Even when it closes the doors, the public body must keep minutes and can't vote in secret.

DAN MURPHY, the Oakland County executive, is aware of the forthcoming change. I talked to him about it. It doesn't bother him.

"Dan's the most open guy there is," says one of his colleagues, correctly.

Ed McNamara, the Wayne County executive, is much the same.

But Detroit Mayor Coleman Young? That's another matter. As a mayor, he doesn't deal with the Open



Tim Richard

Meetings Act, but he has some strong views on the Freedom of Information Act — all negative.

Young let the economic development director go to jail before revealing public information.

This year Young let city attorney go to jail for hiding records about the \$40 million busing the city took on buying and selling machine-

ery in the Chrysler land deal.

Over the weekend, two city chemists who work in the sewage treatment plant were punished for giving technical papers at a meeting of the Detroit River Bi-National Public Advisory Council without prior city approval.

The chemists contended it was all public information anyway. Tough luck. They were suspended for three days.

It will be interesting to see Young's attitude when and if he realizes the Big Four must meet in public as of the day in January the RTC act becomes law.

NEWSPAPERS, this one included, found themselves printing clarifications about reports on the state Legislature's closing days, Dec. 6-8.

The Legislature let bills pile up and passed things in a rush in the closing hours.

The Senate, in its final session, took 182 roll call votes compared to 741 in the rest of the entire year. The House took 160 roll call votes — Rep. Lyn Bankes of Livonia said it was a one-day record — compared to 999 for the rest of year.

The Senate gave 53 bills final passage on the final day. The House gave 108 bills final passage. Together, 31 percent of all bills passed by both chambers for the year came during the final day.

Why? A lot of it is screw-around games: I won't pass your chicken bill unless you pass my widgeon bill. A lot is sloppy work habits, particularly among House leaders who tend to put off everything to the last minute.

I FELT particularly sad for the women seeking laws to allow them to do day-care work in their homes despite local zoning ordinances. To accomplish their goal, they needed three separate bills — one each to amend city, township and county laws.

During its final 21-hour day, the Senate failed to concur in House amendments, and the city zoning bill failed. Unless the Senate acts on it during its formal adjournment session Dec. 29, those women will have wasted two years of work.

Tim Richard, political writer and columnist, is the Oakland County editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

## Seeing our worst fears all become nightmares

IT'S TRULY a shame how paranoid we've become.

We must worry about where we go, when we go there and who's lurking around every corner because, it seems, someone's always there to harm us. What a pity.

Years ago, the bogymen was used as an imaginary way to get children to obey. Today, parents don't dare use such a character — because the bogymen has become a real life character in Everytown, U.S.A.

He has spawned parental paranoia in Jack and Jill Average who wonder what will become of their children in a world where crime is on the increase and — as the police always tell us — knows no boundaries.

Because of this understandable fear, an incident that occurred last week in the southeast corner of Farmington Hills had some parents upset.

On one of those bitter cold mornings, two upper elementary-age children — a girl and a boy — were approached by an elderly man who lived near them, who had warmed his car and offered the children a ride to school. They declined.

The incident was reported to the principal at William Grace Elementary.



Casey Hans

tary who had the good judgment to advise parents about the incident and that police were investigating.

ONE PARENT was apparently upset enough to contact a daily newspaper and offer one version of the story.

With the media hot on the tail of a rapist of young school girls in Detroit, that parent's report became a short article, which, in turn, became a story on a morning radio news broadcast, which, in turn, led metro television stations to jump on the story.

You get the idea. This feeding frenzy did nothing to stem the parental fears. It did not give insight into police investigations, but simply acted to fan the flames. Police told the Observer Friday they had questioned the man, and that the situation appeared innocent. Only the man knows for sure.

I agree that parents, teachers, principals, police and all of us need to be watchful, and maybe even extra careful today. But that's the pity of it all.

We're always complaining that "no one knows their neighbors anymore." It's not that people today aren't neighborly, or friendly. It's that they're afraid to reach out and help because they're afraid of getting slapped down.

Our man in Farmington Hills may have noticed the nip in the air and remembered how cold it was when he walked to school 60-70 years ago. Perhaps he was offering a helping hand. Perhaps not.

BUT INNOCENT or not, men of any age today can't do that. It's not socially acceptable behavior anymore, whether it's a young man in his teens or an older man with a world of knowledge, to help young children. It's more accepted if someone simply looks the other way.

We are pulling apart, just as we need to pull ourselves together. That's when the bogymen will get us.

Casey Hans is a staff writer with the Farmington Observer.

## Development hinders readiness for school

Q: My son was placed in Kindergarten. What is Kindergarten and is it good for my son?

A: Kindergarten, developmental kindergarten or pre-kindergarten is for those students who are old enough to attend regular kindergarten but who may need the luxury of another year of schooling before entering the mainstream. It does not mean that your child is stupid. Assuming appropriate testing has been given, it could mean his fine motor development, hand-eye coordination, language and communication skills or his social or emotional level require some special attention prior to going into regular kindergarten.

Research has clearly indicated that some 5-year-old children, especially boys, that enter kindergarten may not be ready and can have problems in school because of the lack of readiness. Allowing trained teachers to work with such children in a developmental kindergarten setting can pay positive dividends. Developmental kindergarten takes into consideration the fact that children are different, some walk sooner than others, talk sooner than others, and some are not necessarily ready for kindergarten just because they are 5 years old.



Doc Doyle

A major problem to many school districts is cost and space. It requires additional teachers, space, materials, transportation and supervision. Another problem is that the pre-kindergarten population usually continues to grow. In one school district, the percent went from 6 percent to 34 percent in three years. Some districts put a "cap" on the

number to be admitted. What is really needed is a revised curriculum that is driven less by textbooks and dittos and more by a developmental approach, which allows students to progress in hands-on activities in a cooperative learning environment which takes into consideration the social, emotional and academic readiness of the child.

Dr. James Doyle is an associate superintendent in the Troy School District. The answers provided here are the opinions of Dr. Doyle and not the Troy School District. Questions for this column should be sent to Doc Doyle c/o the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150.

## keeping up with government

Looking for information about state government? The League of Women Voters has a toll-free telephone service (1-800-292-5823) that may be helpful.

The league's Citizen Information Center in Lansing offers to help people find out about such things as pending legislation, the state consti-

tution, election laws, voting regulations or tax information.

The telephone is answered from 10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. weekdays. The telephone service is paid for by the league's education fund. The League of Women Voters is a non-profit organization that works to keep voters interested and informed about governmental issues.

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