

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48024 Robert Sklar editor/477-5450

16A(F) OME Thursday, March 15, 1989

Downtown It's a treasure for community

DOWNTOWN FARMINGTON may be light years from the dark days of the mid-'70s, when the death knell loomed.

But now all is rosy now. The retail mix is still lacking. Modern design contrasts with century-old buildings. Benches, trash cans, bike racks and a public restroom are noticeably missing. Promotion continues to be fragmented. And competition for consumer dollars lurks in nearby Farmington Hills, Novi and Livonia.

Still, the central business district (CBD) — home to 140 businesses and a building dating back to the 1850s — is on the move. It boasts a small-town charm and is more shopper oriented than ever. Vitality has replaced despair.

Conspicuous are the fruits of a five-year, \$1.4-million revitalization program yielding patterned sidewalks, new curbs, new trees, pedestrian lights, seasonal banners, decorative signposts, landscaped parking and a lighted crosswalk.

Cooperation has become the buzzword, even if it's not always practiced. No longer do vacant storefronts rival the number of shoppers.

IT'S WITHIN this upbeat backdrop we invite the community to join us next Wednesday on Downtown Day to salute our historic downtown area.

Hosted by the DDA, the event itself will feature a historic happening: a 500-foot-long hot dog stretching nearly a tenth of a mile.

The custom-made red hot will be served at high noon during a complimentary cookout on the northeast corner of Grand River and Farmington Road — the CBD's main crossroads.

"Lighthearted as it may seem, Downtown Day carries an important message," says DDA executive director Wendy Strip Sittsamer.

"Downtown Farmington is among a rare group of remaining downtown areas in our country. We are inviting the downtown supporters to show their commitment to the area — its preservation as well as its development — by joining in the celebration."

Tobacco free Education provides best route

IT'S ENOUGH TO make some people gasp for breath. After all, the concept is a radical one — a tobacco-free Michigan by the year 2000. The idea is the work of the 1989 Michigan Tobacco Reduction Task Force, through the Michigan Department of Public Health Center for Health Promotion.

The executive summary is comprehensive, listing some 19 pages of recommendations.

For those who suffer through the insensitivities of belching smokestacks — and for those left frazzled by increasingly stringent rules against smoking — the report signals a new path down tobacco road. But whether the state legislature ignites itself into action and prepares some legislation remains to be seen.

There are concepts in the report's one-sided drive to wipe out tobacco use that aren't recognized. Those concepts include the one that says morality and health issues can't be legislated. It just won't work.

EVEN MORE BASIC than that is the question of whether tobacco products should be banned. One does have to take into consideration somewhere along the line the impact of possible legislation on the tobacco industry. However, that doesn't mean that the federal subsidies in the form of price supports and income tax deduction for advertising should be continued.

There are valid points to be made in arguing for the report. Those include the effects of secondhand smoke, the impact of smoking on the health care system and the realization that while we may not want to wipe out tobacco, we don't have to make it any easier for smokers to get it. During 1987, Michigan taxpayers spent \$1.9 billion on tobacco use, according to the task force report. That figure included medical expenses and lost income due to smoking-related disease and death.

Groups at special risk, the report said, are women, pregnant women, blacks, Hispanics, people with low educational levels and people with low income.

AFTER YEARS of study, no reasonable person can argue with the health claims that tobacco is linked to heart disease and cancer. The number of those who died in Michigan from tobacco-related diseases topped 16,000 in 1987. We can't cover here all suggestions made by the task force, but let's review those we see as particularly significant.

• "State law should prohibit the sale of tobacco products through vending machines." This comes under the category of not making cigarettes easy for minors to get at. Sure, they'll

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Vigorous downtown boosters, we're delighted to join the DDA in co-sponsoring the I.D. (Identify Downtown) Photo Contest as part of Downtown Day.

Charming as they are, the biggest drawback to downtowns is lack of central ownership. Lots of property owners with lots of marketing concepts make it hard to weave a common strategy.

Somewhat, the various concepts must be distilled to benefit individual merchants as well as the CBD. Herein a DDA comes into play.

The real worth of a DDA lies in how successfully public improvement inspires private investment.

So it's good to see Strip Sittsamer, in her 1989 annual report:

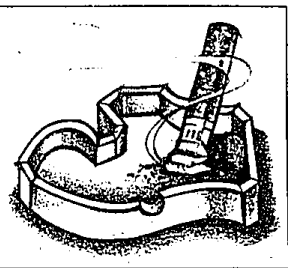
- cite a dozen facade improvement, building renovation and new construction projects.
- recount how 75 businesses, groups and individuals contributed \$40,000 for a gazebo square.

THE NEW trees adorning downtown streets are symbolic of the city's commitment to keeping green the order of the day on the walkways and in the cash registers. They're living reminders of the healthy growth that care and commitment can promote.

Downtown Farmington indeed is special. But an economic downturn could force the improvement train to slam on the brakes.

So amid the CBD's resurgence, let's remember the vital work that's still ahead. As DDA board member Frank Clappison perceptively put it:

"The downtowns we have today are the only downtowns we will ever have. No one is building downtowns anymore and it is up to us to make sure that downtowns like Farmington will endure."



try other ways, but at least this closes off one possibility.

Along with same line is a recommendation that would "prohibit the distribution of free or discounted tobacco products," including through the mail distribution. That only encourages use by minors.

• The task force recommends a "prevention-based" state tobacco excise tax of 70 percent of the wholesale price for all tobacco products. This plan is more punitive than preventive and ought to be snuffed out.

The recommendation extending current restaurant non-smoking sections to 50 percent of capacity, an issue taken up by state Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, would go along way toward forcing compliance by those restaurants that try to table current regulations.

BUT THE MOST important smoke-free strategies involve promotion of a tobacco-free lifestyle for adults and children and establishment of a school-based anti-tobacco education program.

So far the June 1989 media campaign has involved television, billboards and posters. It's being recommended that other tactics be started as well, informing people about tobacco control laws.

The school-based Smoke-Free Class of 2000 is using a promotional campaign. And in three-fourths of Michigan's school districts, the Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education is a curriculum in place for grades kindergarten through eight.

The education mode is far more palatable than many of the others set forth in the task force report. It's a way to start breathing easy in the decade ahead.



Push for freeway exit; student centers excel

THOUGHTS I'D like to share:

• On the road — Having driven M-102 many times during the past 4 1/2 years, I'd like to offer this suggestion to Farmington's new traffic and safety board:

Petition the Michigan Department of Transportation to add a westbound exit at Farmington Road. There's already an eastbound exit there.

The freeway — from Halsted to Tuck a bypass around downtown Farmington — undoubtedly would be used more by commuters if a westbound exit also was available at Farmington Road.

As it is now, westbound commuters must take Grand River unless they're traveling the entire 3 1/2-mile stretch because M-102 has no westbound exit between Halsted and Tuck.

When built in the late '60s, the freeway was meant primarily as a bypass for through traffic to ease congestion on Grand River, a popular northwest route between Detroit and Brighton.

But as residential and commercial development has picked up in the Farmington area, so has the need for a westbound exit at Farmington Road, the only major road along the



Bob Sklar

freeway between Tuck and Halsted and a gateway to Livonia and downtown Farmington.

A westbound exit would lead to Freedom Road, providing easy access to Farmington Road.

It's possible the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) might oppose such an exit because of the potential for drawing traffic from Grand River. But I doubt the exit would siphon potential shoppers.

To the contrary, it might make the central business district (CBD) more accessible for shoppers from Redford Township and Livonia.

• Bucking the odds — The optional center kindergarten program, looked upon so suspiciously and derisively by some parents overly fearful of losing traditional neighborhood kindergarten classes three years ago, is one of Farmington Public Schools' success stories in early childhood education.

With a child at and frequent visitor to Fairview Early Childhood Center, I speak from first-hand experience.

• Worth noting — Harry Wingerter's re-election to a third term as DDA president. The long-time downtown businessman has held the top post since the DDA's formation in 1986.

A quiet leader, Wingerter totes the DDA banner proudly. A charter merchant in the Downtown Farmington Center, he provides a keen sense of the CBD's darkest days during the mid-'70s.

• Sign of the times — Farmington Hills assigning detective Patrick Meath, a former Oakland County Narcotics Enforcement Team officer, to local narcotics investigations full-time.

• An eye-catcher — Still one of the most scenic stretches in Farmington Hills is Halsted, between 12 and 14 Mile. Development has dulled its rustic luster from 20 years ago, but the vistas remain panoramic.

Bob Sklar is editor of the Farmington Observer.

Farmington readers' forum

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Cable nudity is shocking!

To the editor:
Last Tuesday, while scanning cable stations for a favorite program, my husband and 5-year-old daughter came across a western with three frontally nude women "helping" a man out of his pants.

I called MetroVision. I was told they do not control what is shown that we were being offered a "free preview" to entice us to order that particular pay-for-view channel.

This was at 9:30 in the afternoon, when most kids are getting home from school and doing the same thing.

I'm experiencing the feeling that it's my fault — that we should have known to block out that channel, even though we don't normally receive it, or any pay channel; that it's my fault I don't know how; that we shouldn't have ordered cable; that we shouldn't let her watch any television.

Why would a film service schedule this movie to play at this time of day? Am I so naive as to believe that the FCC regulations will protect us from the influence we don't want in our home?

If pornography is described as, "I. Originally, a description of prostitutes and their trade; 2. Writings, pictures, etc. intended to arouse sexual desire; 3. The production of such writings, pictures, etc.," and if the Federal Commission on Pornogra-

phy finds that it is highly addictive, why do we have to be subject to it boldly broadcast into our lives so unexpectedly?

I value many of the community and educational programs available on cable. I hope we have more alternatives than to cancel it.

Sherrie Stewart,
Farmington Hills

Schools must monitor policy

To the editor:
I agree with the Observer's March 12 editorial that the school district's open enrollment policy at the secondary school level should be continued and continually monitored.

I feel, moreover, that the policy should eventually be implemented at all grade levels, elementary and secondary, but subject to reasonable regulation.

Even with the completion of Hillside Elementary School and a new elementary attendance plan, there are likely to be "hot spots" of crowding in our schools and students should have the option of attending a less-crowded school elsewhere in the district.

There are some legitimate concerns with respect to open enrollment. If not professionally implemented, it could evolve into a popularity contest between our various schools.

More importantly, although open

enrollment gives students and parents more choices with respect to the venue of their education, all students should have the choice of a high quality education in their own neighborhood or "home" school without sacrificing a full set of curriculum options.

Open enrollment could become a poor excuse to limit curriculum options at some schools, especially at the secondary level.

Open enrollment should also not be used as an excuse for allowing overcrowding to exist anywhere in the district. The same high standard of education and comparable curriculum choices should be available at all of our schools. These concerns can be addressed and do not outweigh the merits of an open enrollment policy.

Parents and students should have more options and choices with respect to their educations and a choice of schools, within a framework of reasonable rules and guidelines, should be available at all grade levels in the Farmington district from elementary school through high school.

Recognizing the advantages of neighborhood schools, most families, under open enrollment plans, have chosen to attend their respective home schools; therefore, open enrollment is unlikely to be disruptive to school operations and will provide those families that do exercise their options under such a policy with legitimate education choices.

Richard I. DeVries,
Farmington Hills

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