

points of view

Water users parched by long repair delay

YOU DON'T truly appreciate water until you must do without it. Make no mistake about that.

I was one of the unlucky western Oakland County residents and shopkeepers who lost water or water pressure for at least nine hours Saturday.

And it was as trying as it was frustrating, not knowing when the wet stuff would flow in the shower, toilet or kitchen sink again.

It soon became clear the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department must notify users well before planned water main repairs so affected residents and businesses can better prepare for a water shutoff.

For families, it was pure conjecture how long three gallons of drinking water and a bathtub full of all-

purpose water would last. Businesses felt the sting of trickling water in a painful way — at the cash register.

Thousands of water users were left high and dry much of Saturday after a planned six-hour shutoff, in the middle of the night, to weld a steel ring around a leaking water main joint at 14 Mile and Northwestern Highway in Farmington Hills went awry.

A shutoff valve failed, forcing Detroit Water & Sewerage Department workers to pump out more than one-million gallons of water from the 54-inch main before the welding could be finished. Two days before, a clamp and gaskets failed to plug the leak.

SO WHAT was supposed to be an overnight inconvenience starting at



Bob Sklar

11:30 p.m. Friday turned nightmare for the unprepared.

Much of the anger felt by residents and businesses stemmed from lack of accurate information about the extent of the problem.

Many folks felt betrayed after the original 5:30 a.m. Saturday service resumption time came and went.

After that, Detroit water officials told us, via radio and cable TV, that

service would resume by 11 a.m., then 1 p.m., then — shockingly — 6 p.m. or later.

Farmington Hills Assistant City Manager Dave Call spent much of the day trying his darndest to keep us abreast on cable Channel 18, but his reports changed as repair conditions changed. He, too, was at the mercy of Detroit water officials.

Let's not be too quick to bash the hard-working Detroit water crews, some of whom went sleepless for 1½ days rather than abandon the work site once a routine repair became a civic emergency.

They couldn't predict the failed shutoff valve, but common sense dictates they should've considered a valve failure a possibility.

Frankly, they unwittingly led anx-

ious water users on. Saying they had no idea when full water pressure would resume might not have allayed the anger but it at least would've been honest.

"I FELT the situation was abominably handled," said Farmington Hills resident Carol Plisner. "Neither Detroit nor Farmington Hills has the right to create that type of civic emergency without proper planning. What if it had lasted another 12 hours?"

"We try to satisfy the most people while inconveniencing the least," said Jim Heath, Detroit Water & Sewerage Department maintenance and repair superintendent.

"We couldn't be negligent once we started the repair. We couldn't just walk away until after the holiday.

"You're damned if you do and damned if you don't."

The next time a major, non-emergency infrastructure repair is planned, I urge the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department, working with local officials, to alert affected water/sewer users by mail a few days in advance.

The letter should outline water conservation steps, potential repair delays, health precautions and an emergency number to call. Not everyone has cable TV.

In the aftermath of a parched Saturday, I, for one, would've appreciated being told of potential water-shutoff consequences while the tap still worked.

Bob Sklar is editor of the Farmington Observer.

In hot pursuit of equity

BILL KEITH and James O'Neill Jr. are two state representatives whose names aren't exactly household words outside their home towns of Garden City and Saginaw, respectively.

Better learn those names. Now that voters have rejected higher taxes for schools, these two lawmakers are pushing for the goal of equity in state school funding.

Keith, 60, a banker and former school board member, chairs the House Education Committee. He has 17 years seniority. O'Neill, 61, a former school administrator, chairs the House Appropriations school aid subcommittee. He has 23 years seniority.

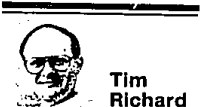
Some of Michigan's 562 public school districts spend only \$2,000 per pupil. They are mostly small and rural, with no industry, no high technology plants, no offices, no giant malls, no movie houses with four theaters.

Other districts spend as much as \$8,000 per pupil. They have most of the above. Many are clustered in a belt from Troy to Ann Arbor. Most get no general state aid because of their healthy property tax bases.

Many Observer & Eccentric areas are in that belt. I live in that belt, too.

Life is not all luxury, however. Our property values are rising, but so are our assessments and taxes.

Yet few people in these parts realize that many school districts in the state are genuinely hurting financially. An increasing number are bumping up against the absolute



Tim Richard

constitutional limit of 50 mills as a property tax rate. Most people around the metro suburbs don't know there is such a thing.

KEITH and O'Neill came up with a revolutionary plan to take what few categorical grants the high tech belt gets and pump as much as possible into the general state aid bill. The categorical are mainly Social Security, pensions and grants for specialized programs.

Naturally, the reps from Troy, Birmingham, Southfield, Livonia, Redford and Plymouth either ganged up to vote no or else didn't vote, the equivalent of voting no.

In the O&E circulation area, only Keith and Justin Barnes of Westland voted yes on Senate Bill 830 (House substitute 3), the Keith sponsored version of the school aid bill.

In the high tech belt's eyes, it was a Soviet version of Robin Hood — take from the rich so that everybody will be mediocre. It added no new money to the overall state aid bill.

BUT IN THE outstate counties of Eaton and Clinton and Livingston, they loved SB 830 (H-3), giving it 56

votes, a bare majority. It goes to a House Senate conference committee to iron out the differences.

Even if the Keith sub doesn't prevail this year, it will be back next year. The economic forces of nature are behind him. My bet is he will prevail.

Keith argues it's false to say, as many editorials do, that out of formula school districts in the high tech belt got no state aid. They get millions for the retirement benefits.

To his mind, "equity" is not robbing the rich to make everybody mediocre. Equity became a necessity in Kentucky, where the courts declared the whole funding system unconstitutional. Kentucky's repair bill is running to \$1.2 billion, the equivalent of nearly \$3 billion in Michigan.

Keith's goal isn't just taking from the rich but making more districts eligible for general state aid — 90 percent instead of the current 70 percent.

Frankly, I am cool to the Keith plan. I'd rather raise everybody up to an adequate level than knock down a few rich districts for the sake of equity.

But the political realities are that many outstate districts are hurting.

So we need to know those two names: Keith and O'Neill.

Tim Richard is director of the SCC News Service, which serves the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Her legacy: kindness

SAYING GOODBYE to a special friend is never easy, especially when that friend has died.

But this past week, hundreds of us found comfort in the sheer numbers of those saying goodbye to Marie McGee. From congressmen, county executive and mayor, from friends of decades past, from colleagues and corporate executives, the community mourned.

Marie's death was a surprise to everyone. She just wasn't the sickly type. Just the opposite. She was always there, always working and doing it with a vigor unparalleled by most.

When thinking of Marie you thought of energy and laughing. You thought of a person who cared more than most, whether it be for her children, her co-workers, her company or her community. She was just that way.

For those of us in the newspaper business, she was the essence of what a journalist should be — diligent in the quest for truth, but compassionate in the pursuit.

She set a high standard, a very high standard. And the one thing that irritated her more than anything else were those who were willing to settle for less than perfection, no matter the excuse.



Steve Barnaby

THOSE LACKING perception often missed that very important quality about Marie. Unlike a lot of the power brokers lounging around our society, Marie was devoid of a large ego.

She concentrated on more important things, like listening and doing. She was a very wise listener and a great doer.

And as many of you realize, Marie wore many hats, often on the same day.

We at the Observer & Eccentric knew her as a journalist who touched all segments of the community through her work on the multitude of special sections, from fashion, to weddings, to home furnishings, to the arts. She could do it all.

Her children knew her as a mother who for the past 12 years raised her five children on her own after her husband died. Many in the Livonia

community knew her as a civic activist, serving at one time or another on the Livonia Arts Commission, Historical Commission, the advisory committee of the Women's Resource Center at Schoolcraft College and, of course there was Greenmead.

MY, HOW she loved Greenmead, the historical village on Eight Mile Road. And just last week she was elected to the board of directors of the local Zonta chapter, a woman's professional organization.

And although her depth of participation represented how much she cared for her community, just knowing Marie was the real bonus. She added to everyone's life who allowed themselves to be touched by her quiet wisdom and kindness.

I'll always feel sorry for those who didn't avail themselves of the opportunity to know Marie. They missed out on knowing a very important person.

But then, as John Donne tells us, death "comes equally to us all." Being the democrat that Marie was, big "D" and small "d," alike, she would understand that better than many.

Steve Barnaby is managing editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

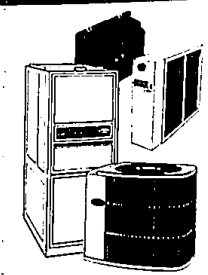
Frank Tanana, Pitcher with the Tigers, says:

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