

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48024

Bob Sklar editor/477-5450

16A(F)

O&E Thursday, June 21, 1990

School agenda

Pivotal district decisions await

JUST 10 days have passed since election day. The two candidates elected to four-year terms on the Farmington school board haven't been sworn in yet.

But the challenges that await the seven-member board, as the 1990-91 school year nears, continue to mount.

Some of the tougher challenges include:

• DRUG-FREE ZONES

Designating school campuses as drug-free zones will succeed only with dedicated student/community involvement. Such zones won't magically evolve from a mere administrative pronouncement. Beyond that, the district must do a better job in publicizing its drug awareness programs. Even we didn't know how many there are until our current drug survey. Suburban High "Saying no to drugs" must become a community-wide theme.

• BOARD MEETINGS

We applaud the board's recent road show — periodically meeting in schools instead of the administrative center. That's not only a good way to bring the district hierarchy closer to the people, but also provide a chance for trustees to get a feel for the aging schools.

• BETTER FACILITIES

Facility improvements are vital in a district where the newest building is nearly 30 years old. They'll help make buildings look nicer, help equalize learning opportunities and help assure program continuity. A student's education shouldn't be compromised because he or she attends an under-equipped school.

• DISTRICT GOALS

With Superintendent Mike Flanagan's administrative goals as a springboard, the school board should once again look at its goals. Revised goals, with time lines for achieving them, should be set after public hearings and administrative feedback. Goal setting that intimately involves the taxpayers will help give the board a long-term direction supported by the public.

• READING SKILLS

In its quest to meet student needs in gifted education, special education, foreign language, vo-

educational education, college prep, preschool education and other programs, the district must never slight its commitment to the key building block of kindergarten-through-12th-grade education: student reading skills.

• COMPUTER LITERACY

It's crucial that our graduates are literate in everyday computer use, no matter what their future holds. We're confident the new administration understands the importance of providing high-tech teaching tools and setting minimum computer literacy standards.

• SCHOOL ACCREDITATION

Every school in the district should be accredited, not just the senior highs. Accreditation gives a school a clear-cut set of standards to live by and serves as an outside audit of student output. It makes the district sensitive to a school's shortcomings and provides a blueprint for improvement.

• SPENDING CONTROLS

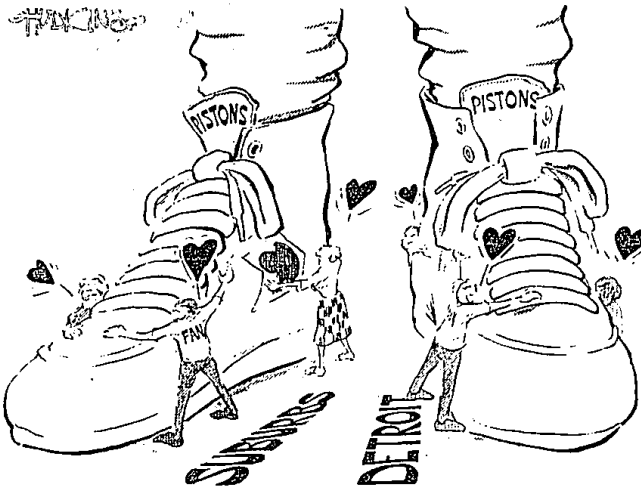
With responsibility for a \$92 million budget, 30 buildings, 12,000 students and 1,900 employees, the board faces a delicate balancing act. Trustees must be accountable yet restrained in deciding when to loosen the drawstrings for non-instructional needs such as landscaping and when to tighten it in deference to taxpayers stunned by skyrocketing taxes.

• STUDENT LEADERS

The district must never downplay its commitment to encouraging student leadership. One way to assure that is by making the Student Round Table-sponsored leadership conference held this spring an annual event. That forum did as much as anything this past school year to break down communication barriers dividing the three senior highs.

• PUSH FOR CHOICE

Choice is sure to become a buzz word for the '90s as our schools grasp for ways to extend classroom options in an ever-changing world. Common campuses, year-round classes, magnet schools, independent studies, enrichment programs and creative schedules are all legitimate possibilities.



Don't look to Washington for solutions to problems

A SMALL dinner party. Candles sparked off wine glasses. Dessert had just been served.

"The country's stuck in the mud. We need some leadership, some vision, an agenda. I just hope the president and Congress can come up with it," said a senior business executive whose company employs tens of thousands.

Heads nodded gravely. Conventional wisdom.

Rubbish, I thought.

To think the solution to our nation's problems will come out of Washington is both naive and masochistic.

Naive because Washington, whether ruled by Republicans or Democrats, is concerned solely with what goes on in Washington, not the rest of the country. Visit DC. People ask, "What's going on out there in the real world?"

Masochistic because Washington, whether run by liberals or conservatives, is at bottom nothing more than a vast monument to enduring bureaucracies. The vast changes sweeping our economics and government mean an end to the central role of bureaucracies.

HISTORICALLY, bureaucracies evolved to coordinate and control many individual transactions — Social Security claims, tax payments, property tax payments to the bank, ordering a car at the dealer, children's report cards from school.

But today, when the personal computer, phone modem and voice mail are becoming common, the need for bureaucracies — ravenous, centralized, inflexible — is fast disappearing.

The vast changes sweeping our economics and government mean an end to the central role of bureaucracies.

While Washington remains captive to its bureaucracies, the real action is in the real world. Examples:

• In Minnesota, a new law lets parents choose their child's school anywhere in the state, eliminating residence requirements and forcing schools to compete.

• Near Miami, Fla., an experiment in "school-based autonomy" lets 32 schools be managed by teachers and parents, not central school bureaucrats. A similar test is under way in Rochester, N.Y.

• Michigan's State Board of Education is developing a core curriculum — setting out what kids should learn in our schools. But the plan is that school districts will be free to choose how to achieve the defined educational outcomes. (Indeed, Gov. James Blanchard recently called for abolition of the State Board of Education, in part on the ground it is excessively centralized and bureaucratic and unresponsive to parents and teachers.)

• In New York, a company called America Works is paid \$5,000 by the state for each welfare recipient placed in a job (average salary: \$14,000), but only after the employee has stayed seven months. Taxpayers win: The fee is less than half the \$12,000 per year to keep a family of



Philip Power

three on welfare.

Everywhere, experiments in decentralizing are cropping up.

I THINK this issue will come to the fore in politics, too.

The start is that the workings of government — especially the federal — have become less and less efficient. Next came the Republican charge that Democrats were apologists for taxing and spending, regardless of results.

Michiganians from both parties are working on new models of how governments might work. Community self-help groups, funded by diversion of local property taxes and managed by networks of personal computers, are being designed.

Certificates of minimum skill attainment are being talked about as a precondition of jobs for youth. Not far off is a rule requiring that those who collect unemployment checks also be enrolled in training programs.

Never has politics been so filled with imagination and experiment. But you would never know it if you lived and worked in Washington.

Philip Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His award-winning column will appear periodically.

Suburban high

Truth best weapon in drug war

SOMEONE ONCE SAID perception is reality. That's true, until the facts are made available.

It's been the perception of the majority of Oakland County residents that Detroit has been the main source of the drug problem in our suburbs. Further, since crack has been mentioned so much in the media, many thought the county was shot through with rock cocaine.

Those, and other perceptions, are false.

This week, we've published the results of more than four months of investigative work into drug use and abuse in our communities. We went to the streets and into hangouts to talk to grade school children, teenagers, college students and adults. We joined police and narcotics officers on a raid.

The whole point of our special report, published Monday and today, is to answer one question: Just how serious is the drug problem in Oakland County?

Our goal was to answer that question using local sources in one-on-one interviews. No hearsay. No "allegedly this" or "suspected of that." No quoting statistics from some think tank in New York or Washington. No stereotyping or nurturing preconceived ideas.

WE WENT FOR a fresh start. In doing so, we purposely set out to uncover the problem alone. Our reports are intentionally light on official comment because we've already, in many previous issues, devoted dozens of stories to the official line on drugs.

It was time to talk to the residents to measure the accuracy of the official line. They told us that:

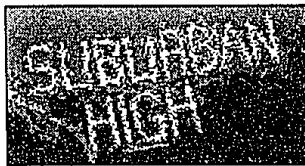
• Drugs are plentiful in our communities. Cocaine is the dominant drug in the county, with marijuana coming up second.

• LSD is making a comeback in grade schools, although the youngsters we talked to generally looked down on the drug scene.

• Athletes on local sports teams do drugs — mostly marijuana — sometimes before competition.

• While the use and sale of drugs isn't as blatant today as it was, say, a decade ago, they're still there for the asking — you just have to know the right person.

THOSE FACTS, and others, put things in a different perspective.



In a way, it lends a lot of credibility to what law enforcement people have been telling us for quite a while — that drugs and dealers are right here in our suburbs and few have to make a road trip to Detroit — or to Pontiac — for drugs. In fact, most of the people we talked to said they'd rather not drive to Detroit for drugs. They think it's too dangerous.

They bear out the statistics recently released by the Oakland County Narcotics Enforcement Team: That Oakland County has plenty of dealers. 121 were arrested by NDET in 1989 compared with 56 non-Oakland residents. That those dealers are young, white and male and generally deal outside their immediate neighborhood. That cocaine was by far the most common drug purchased and seized last year in each of our communities — more than 11,000 grams.

It has been our mission to tell you the truth — that illegal drugs are part of life in our Oakland County neighborhoods. Though they don't rival the abuse of alcohol — either by adults or teens — that's no reason to turn aside the problem.

By our measure, though adults are more discreet and young children appear to be turning away, drugs are still very much in evidence, particularly among the high school set.

There is questioning of the tactics of the drug war. One main ingredient in winning it is to tell the truth. To say no one can use drugs is a lot different than saying no one should.

At the same time, that cocaine (and crack) is "the devil's drug" is endorsed at all levels — drug users, lab chemists, therapists and law enforcement officials.

Our mission: to raise the public's awareness of the true drug scene in our part of Oakland County. We hope that mission is accomplished.

Farmington readers' forum

Letters must be signed, original copies and include the address and telephone number of the writer. Names will be withheld from publication only for sufficient reason. We reserve the right to edit them. Send letters to Readers' Forum, Farmington Observer, 21898 Farmington Road, Farmington 48024.

Civic story informative

To the editor:

The article on the Civic Theatre (May 10) by Robbie Plansek (8th grader at Dunckel Middle School) was so interesting, informative and well written.

I would hope to see more items in the paper by such prolific "special writers."

Pam Wright, Farmington

Thank you for offering help

To the editor:

I'd like to thank my many supporters and election workers for helping me earn a strong third-place finish in the recent Farmington school board election.

I will continue to represent you through the parent groups at Longacre, Power and Farmington High School. I will continue to take an active part in meetings and committees. I will find ways to address the concerns you brought to me during the campaign. I will definitely run for a seat on the school board next year.

Thank you for your encouragement, support and hard work. Together we were almost successful; next year we will be.

Laura Myers, Farmington

Voting record a real shocker

To the editor:

As former chair of the Farmington Hills Committee to Increase Voter Participation, I was shocked and outraged by the dismal voting records of the candidates for Farmington school board (revealed in your recent article).

I was even more disturbed by the lack of explanation given by the candidates for the insignificant reasons given by those who did try to explain.

To justify one's lack of exercise of his or her precious right to vote by explaining that "most of the school board elections are not that important" or that "one could not find the precinct" is absurd.

It is bad enough if the speaker is an "ordinary" citizen, but to hear those kinds of excuses from a candidate for an important public position is unbelievable.

I wonder when these previously uninvolved persons decided to get "involved?" Perhaps it was when their egos needed boosting.

What makes us think they will act any more responsibly if elected to the school board? As I dictate this letter, driving to my office on election day, I have decided that none of these people deserve my vote.

Driving by Warner Middle School today reveals a scene with construction vehicles and very few voters. When will enough of us get angry enough to force the elections to be held at the same time as the national election so that a real contest might develop and the candidates might really have to explain who they are and what they stand for?

David L. Haron, Farmington Hills

Observer & Eccentric® Newspapers

Steve Barnaby, managing editor
Judith Doner Barre, assistant managing editor
Dick Isaham, general manager
Richard Brady, director of advertising
Fred Wright, director of circulation

Suburban Communications Corp.
Philip Power, chairman of the board
Richard Agnien, president