

Opinion

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18A(F) D&E Thursday, November 26, 1992

Runaway truck! Will mayor grab the wheel?

AT FIRST you want to laugh. Then you realize it's not funny. These Farmington Hills City Council meetings are getting to be a bad joke — and so, we must add, are some of the city council members. But these days if anybody's laughing, well, we're afraid it's at the council, not with it.

Farmington Hills City Council is a bickersome bunch these days. It must be obvious to the several in the folding chairs at City Hall and the dozens more who watch on cable television that some of these council members really don't like each other.

Truly, a malaise hangs over the city council chamber. Factions have formed on this issue and that. Some of the members, it was revealed, are a little too close to the developers on whose projects they may someday be voting.

The Monday evening meetings often drag on until they become Tuesday morning sessions. People in the audience blather on and about their pet issues... and so do some of the council members.

And there's disturbing evidence that political parties are playing an increasing role in these supposedly non-partisan functions.

HEY, IT SHOULD be obvious to everyone who cares to look that the Hills council is badly in need of a leader — a parliamentarian with a strong moral streak who will grab the wheel of this runaway truck.

Enter councilman Aldo Vagnozzi. It's his turn to be mayor of Farmington Hills, and mayor of Farmington Hills he will be. The city council said so, 4 votes to 3, during a typically confused session Monday evening.

We wish the new mayor well and congratulate the council on following tradition in electing the mayor pro tem — Vagnozzi — to be the next mayor. The election really should have been a quick item (with a unanimous vote) on a long agenda, not the donnybrook that the split decision indicates.

Farmington Hills is a "weak-mayor" city. The

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mayor, elected each year by the council, is really nothing more than a glorified council member who attends a few more ribbon cuttings and charity luncheons than the others.

The city itself is run by a professional (and hopefully non-political) city manager who takes direction from the council.

BUT BEING mayor of Farmington Hills seems to require quite a bit more than the usual ceremonial duties these days. There's the whole question of leadership.

It's our opinion that the mayor should be, *ex officio*, the leader of the city council.

The mayor, in lieu of the council president you'd have with a strong mayor, simply has to take control of council affairs — in a way that other council members can abide by and accept.

Our leader must be able to tell vocal spectator(s) as pleasantly as possible that he/she/they has/have been speaking for 20 minutes on this issue and that's quite enough, thank you. Often the same thing must be told to a council member.

Sometimes, council members must be reminded tactfully that it is the purpose of city government to work for the benefit of the citizens. Apparently, some people seem to have forgotten that over there at 11 Mile and Orchard Lake.

Will Aldo Vagnozzi be the leader the council needs? Time will tell. But with his election, plus the naming of Jon Grant, from an opposite faction, as mayor pro tem, things could be a bit more balanced on council come January.

We look forward to a time when people pull together to do a job of work (running the city) in a professional setting.

We need peace (with honor) in that big room at 11 and Orchard Lake. Good luck, Mr. Vagnozzi.

Drug sentences Bill gives judges discretion

THE U.S. SUPREME Court will decide whether to uphold or strike down a Michigan law that imposes a mandatory life sentence with no parole for drug possession.

Keeping such a law on the books will not put a dent in the state's drug problem and will likely lead to violent criminals getting out of jail earlier.

The court will decide whether, under the present law, the penalty for possessing 1½ pounds of cocaine is cruel and unusual punishment.

The only other crime with that severe of a sentence is first-degree murder. The average sentence for second-degree murder is 20 years. For first-degree criminal sexual conduct the average sentence is 13.7 years and for armed robbery it's 6.3 years. That is the average sentence, and doesn't include time off for good behavior, early release, or parole — something unavailable to those in prison on the drug charge.

State Rep. William R. Bryant Jr., R-Grosse Pointe Farms, has introduced a bill that would give judges discretion when sentencing those convicted of possessing drugs. Bryant's bill calls for a minimum five-year sentence while still retaining the maximum penalty of life.

He plans to reintroduce the bill next year if there is no action on it before the end of this legislative session.

Bryant's proposal is in line with drug laws in

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other states and gives judges the necessary discretion when handing down a sentence.

The proposed law makes sense when you consider that about half of the 125 prisoners now serving life for drugs are first-time offenders.

"These were little guys," says Detroit attorney Carla Johnson, who argued for her client Ronald Harmelin, who had been sentenced to life, and against the law before the high court. "It's the Hortonization of politics (citing the negative campaign ads that featured Massachusetts convict Willie Horton)."

The claim by some prosecutors that the stiff sentence will encourage dealers to turn in drug kingpins hasn't proven to be true, and the law's been on the books 12 years.

Then there's the state's overburdened prison system, which already has to release prisoners early to make room for new ones. All but 10 of those serving life for drug possession in Michigan were in prison before 1987. More than 100 have been sentenced since then, putting an increased burden on an already crowded prison system.

And the cost of housing these prisoners is, by a conservative estimate, about \$20,000 a year. A life sentence would be extremely costly, especially if the offender is young at the time of sentencing.

Judges now may be more reluctant to sentence some criminals to already full prisons. But they have no choice about those convicted under the present statute. That will make it more likely that someone who committed a violent crime will be back on the streets sooner.

Why then this law? Because it sounds like a "tough" solution to a crime that our political leadership has given war status. A "war on drugs" would seem to demand an extreme punishment.

But if the punishment is ineffective, add more to a crowded prison system, takes judicial discretion out of the hands of judges and parole boards, and puts violent criminals back on the streets sooner, then it has not served the residents of Michigan well.

We can't just "get tough" with drug users and expect the problem to go away. Education and employment for those most likely to enter the drug trade are much tougher to accomplish, but more effective solutions than mandatory life in prison.

A law that takes this crime out of the political arena and puts it back into the courts will help bring the scales of justice back into balance.



Cultural myths are vital in this land of immigrants

LAST THURSDAY was Thanksgiving, the most American and most mythic of our holidays. Nowhere else in our festive calendar do we all come together to commemorate an event that certainly occurred but surely bore little resemblance to the myths now propagated around it.

But myths are vital in a heterogeneous land such as ours.

For American is white and black, yellow and red, rich and poor, north and south, east and west, urban and suburban and rural. America is a land of waves of immigrants, none bigger than the mass of hopeful poor now pouring across our borders in the South, in the West and in California.

And America is so big, so varied and so lacking a common shared racial or cultural history that it is a hard country to hold together.

That's why myths are important to Americans.

AND THAT'S WHY I was so struck at Peggy Noonan's Nov. 21 column in the Wall Street Journal.

"The children of the new immigrants," she argued, "will get most of their sense of what America is from the general culture and the public schools. It is there that we must give special attention to communicating the great unifying myths that define the dreams, characteristics and special history of America and that even to this day bind us together."

She then proceeded to set out seven great unifying myths:

The coming of the Pilgrims, who demonstrated that courage and suf-

The greatest commonality we have as a country — greater by far than any of our great myths — is our shared language. As we are learning from the experience of Canada, one country with two languages is an impossibility.

fering could achieve great purposes. The American Revolution, a political act driven by a moral conception of human nature.

The Civil War, fought for our nation's soul, which concluded that Americans may not own other Americans.

The winning of the West, which taught us individualism and the energy and the benefits of working together. And so, too, with the exploration of space.

The great immigrations of 1840-1920, which demonstrated you don't have to be WASP to be a good American.

The civil rights struggle, which demonstrated you could be black and also a full-fledged American.

AMERICA IS NOW experiencing the greatest flow of immigrants since the wave that ended in the 1920s. Many of these new Americans live in Michigan.



Philip Power

So let's be sure we learn the right lessons from our past about our myths.

First, the schools are at the absolute center of making the children of new American parents into comfortable young Americans. Whatever is done about school reform, and however we work to improve school quality, let us never lose sight of the necessity of teaching and re-teaching our myths to our young people.

Second, the greatest commonality we have as a country — greater by far than any of our great myths — is our shared language. As we are learning from the experience of Canada, one country with two languages is an impossibility.

American English is our common language. It is the subtle compelling tie that binds us together.

Whatever is done in our schools, let us never be seduced by the theories of the bilingualists who, for example, want black children to learn "Black English" and expect Hispanic children to be taught in Spanish.

That way lies disaster. And if it takes post-Thanksgiving reflections to realize it, let us all give thanks that it is so.

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

from our readers

Pro-labor is not pro-crime

To the editor:

Tim Richard's column in the Nov. 22 edition is, beginning and end, about a campaign advertisement with emphasized an opponent's position on crime.

In the middle, in one paragraph, you say, "Their decisions tend to be pro-criminal defendant and pro-labor... but they're still pro-defendant and pro-labor."

A suggestion there that pro-labor is pro-crime? Nah. That, sir, is sleazy, shabby rhetoric. Shame on you.

Robert C. Schultz,
Detroit

Greed keeps stores open on holidays

To the editor:

You hear in the news about the breakdown of the family unit and how bad this is for our society. I walked into Kmart the other day and saw a sign that read "Open

Thanksgiving Day" and I became livid.

Big business is taking away another one of our holidays. Just a few years ago all shopping centers were closed on New Year's day; now they are all open. Our family members must work on these days in order that the presidents of these stores and their stockholders can make the big buck.

How much longer until the stores and malls are open Christmas Day? It's not necessary for these stores to be open except greed.

A person said to me in defense of the stores, that if people did not go into them, they would be forced to be closed. However, the stores entice people with big sales and mark downs.

We must stop this stupidity in order to ensure that we may spend one or two days a year with our entire family.

Pamela Miscnar,
Wixom

Drivers, don't block crosswalks

To the editor:

Why do drivers insist on blocking

the crosswalk while waiting for the traffic light to change?

Some drivers are often so intent on trying to turn right on red that they totally ignore the needs of the pedestrian.

As a person who uses a hand-driven auto tri-cycle, it is very frustrating not to be able to cross the street with the light because an inconsiderate driver has blocked the crosswalk.

I cannot understand why it is so difficult for some drivers to stop their cars properly at a light.

Drivers, please be considerate of the needs of the pedestrian and don't block crosswalks.

Deverly D. Correll,
Farmington Hills

Opinions are to be shared

Opinions and ideas are best when shared with others.

That's why the Observer encourages its readers to share their views with others by making use of the From Our Readers column.

While the Observer expresses its opinions on the editorial page, we always leave space open for our readers to express their ideas.

Letters should be mailed to: Editor, Farmington Observer, 21898 Farmington Road, Farmington 48336.

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