

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48336 Tom Baer editor/477-5450

O&E Thursday, March 28, 1991

Ah, vacancies! Chance to improve downtown

IT STICKS out like a sore thumb... that vacant storefront on downtown Farmington's premier corner.

In case anyone hasn't noticed, Chairs Unlimited is no more, having left the newly renovated building on the southwest corner of Grand River and Farmington.

So now the building, which as the Oak Pharmacy attracted soda-sipping Henry Aldrich types in the 1940s and '50s, awaits a new tenant. Yes, Virginia, vacancies do occasionally pop up even in the nicest of downtowns, ones like Farmington's, those old-fashioned, small-town business districts that are on their way back after years of, ah, mall-aise.

Oh well, call the Realtor and dust off the "for rent" sign.

But perhaps what's bad for the furniture store will turn out to be good for downtown Farmington... a challenge, so to speak, instead of a problem, for the Farmington Downtown Development Authority and its leader, Wendy Strip-Sittsamer.

THE DDA DIRECTOR, who has proved over the past few years that she's up to the challenge of renovating old Farmington, seems to view the latest vacancy as a challenge.

"We tend to look at vacancies as opportunities to address the mix of retail and service businesses," she said last week. "I hope we get retail in there. It's not the kind of place we'd want desks and telephones."

Her comments got us thinking about downtown Farmington. In remarking downtown, Strip-Sittsamer and city officials have had some built-in advantages.

For one thing, back in about 1953 the city fathers and mothers did a very smart thing — they tipped out those damnable parking meters from streets and parking lots.

Hallelujah! Shoppers here don't have to feel guilty about the dime or quarter they didn't

shove in the slot — and then ease their guilt by heading for a mall where the parking is free.

And without parking meters, the local police can tend to other businesses besides writing little white love letters to overparked shoppers.

Downtown also has had a movie house, book store and library — all vital elements of an old-fashioned social and retail center of a community.

BUT THERE are problems, too, notably the lack of an anchor.

After all, Rochester has its Mitzfelfeds Department Store, and Plymouth has its Mayflower Hotel. So what's Farmington's big attraction. The venerable Civic Theater? Well... maybe.

Here are a few suggestions which may be tried, if they already haven't been:

- Hold an anti-mall promotion — "Recover from mall-aise... shop downtown Farmington." It'd be good fun, an real attention-getter.

- Vote on a town mascot who would show up in costume at special events like the Founders Festival and sidewalk sales. That would be more fun, and the community could get involved in the voting.

- Clean up downtown and establish a maintenance program for sidewalk trash and snow removal.

- Have heavy trucks use the old Farmington Cut-off (it's been around longer than the Civic Theater) more often so they wouldn't have to bump and rumble through downtown.

- Promote neighborliness among downtown merchants. One way to do this would be for the DDA to sponsor more of those "after hours" get-togethers where business people could brainstorm ideas to improve things.

Farmington's downtown seems to be looking good these days with the shopping bustle and the cash registers ringing and beeping away.

We know it's a scene that the DDA and city officials would like to see continued — if not improved. So would we.

Coping with war Communities pulled together

THE WORLD SHARPENED its focus on Southeast Michigan for the past seven months, starting last August, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Everyone noticed, as though for the first time, that this part of the world includes the largest Arab population outside the Middle East.

The reaction to this geographic discovery was, initially, not much to be proud of. The Arab community that had existed in relative peace now was under renewed scrutiny, with the self-proclaimed wisest among us wondering, in fact, if "they" were going to be a problem during the Persian Gulf war. It was an embarrassing time for the rest of us.

Many residents said this smacked of something they'd already been through, and hoped never to go through again. They talked about Hitler. They talked about sequestering the Japanese during World War II. Some wondered about who had the authority to draw a line in the concrete and aim public suspicion at a large population that had done nothing wrong except exist.

FORTUNATELY, THOUGH, the correct line of thought seems to have prevailed this time. There were a few relatively minor problems during the past seven months. Some tried to tie these problems to the Persian Gulf war, but no one who's lived in an urban area for a while seems that these problems occurred before, and unfortunately will occur after, this war is finally defeated, sealed, certified and over.

Those same people know that economic and social problems are a large contributor to civil unrest and most of the time, when it gets right down to it, a small percentage of people fulfill their own egotistical propensities in these matters.

However, the strong majority of Wayne and Oakland county residents should be commended for setting an example that largely resisted stereotyping and racial hatred, and instead found ways to widen communication and develop greater understanding during a highly emotional episode.

Many of the narrow-minded, for example, expected our local Jewish populations in Southfield and West Bloomfield to unite against perceived Arab threats in their own communities. Instead, although some Jewish institutions took security precautions, they also set an example by opening their doors and inviting Chaldeans and Iraqis to services and programs.

OTHERS ANTICIPATED WIDESPREAD escalation of tensions in area schools with diverse populations. Incredibly, there even was serious discussion in a few Oakland County schools of canceling athletic events, an act that would have made tangible the unfounded fears of stu-

The strong majority of Wayne and Oakland county residents should be commended for setting an example that largely resisted stereotyping and racial hatred, and instead found ways to widen communication and develop greater understanding during a highly emotional episode.

dents automatically brawling over racial lines if given the chance to congregate.

Our students proved to be wiser than that, a credit to them and their parents. International, national and local reporters came here looking for student-vs-student stories, just like they make their annual Halloween pilgrimages to Detroit for Devil's Night fires.

They didn't come away with much. A few had the courage and integrity to report what they found — kids basically getting along with one another, not getting overly excited about an event transpiring 6,000 miles away. Most, though, ignored the news when they found it. No conflict, no story.

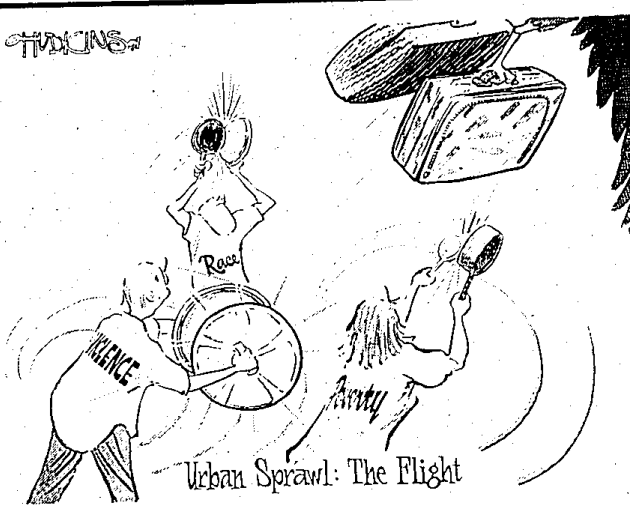
The conflict end was reported nightly. One weekend not too long ago, there was a bomb scare in front of a party store in Garden City. That was serious business, but an isolated incident nevertheless. It was reported, however, as though Hussein had planted it himself.

Then a Martin Luther King Day ceremony at West Bloomfield High, a bomb threat was phoned in. The school was cleared while police searched the building and found nothing. The school celebration was held Jan. 15, the day the United Nations had set as a deadline for Iraq leaving Kuwait.

Some said the threat was due to the deadline. The better answer came from a local police sergeant, who reminded us that the school regularly gets threats, and he thought no more or less of this one due to the war.

Then there was Westland Mayor Robert Thomas, who penned a letter warning of "acts of terrorism and reverse terrorism" in the community, even though nothing yet had happened. Westland's Chamber of Commerce called the mayor's comments "insensitive" and responsible for "undue concern to the business community and the general public."

These are the smaller incidents, though. The story was right in front of us, and that was that people behaved with good intentions during a bad time. It needs to be mentioned.



Censorship unacceptable in high school papers too

THE CONVERSATION is disturbingly repetitive.

"Could you come and talk with my high school newspaper staff. I'm a first year English teacher and I've been put in charge of the student publication. And I really don't know anything about newspapers."

Grinding my teeth, I take a deep breath, smile and eagerly volunteer to serve yet another hitch in a campaign which, to a less persistent soul, could very well appear futile.

But those of us who believe the Bill of Rights is more than just something to wave a flag at are a persistent bunch. We have to be because our numbers are dwindling. Increasingly our students are being misled. They are being taught that censorship is acceptable, even preferable. Weary educators, beaten down by a system which demands conformity, are declaring that a free press really isn't all that important, or practical.

STUDENTS too often are learning that your right to know what the powerful of America are visiting upon the disenfranchised and poor is inappropriate.

And these same young minds are rapidly making their way into the newsrooms and classrooms of America where they are determining that it is better to go along in order to get along with the establishment. They have lost the distinction between editing and censorship.

It's a dangerous trend, one which, if continued, will surely erode our freedoms.

If our children are going to learn how the press works in a free society they must be allowed to operate in a free environment, no matter how frightening it may be to some.



Steve Barnaby

That's why it's essential that those who cherish a free press support a bill recently introduced in the state legislature by Rep. Lyn Jondahl, D-Oakland.

The bill is in response to a 1988 U.S. Supreme Court decision allowing school principals to censor student expression. With Jondahl's initiative, students would be provided with free expression rights when working on school publications or other events such as plays, bulletin board postings and petition distribution.

For many folks that's a scary thought.

If our children are going to learn how the press works in a free society they must be allowed to operate in a free environment, no matter how frightening it may be to some.

THE IDEA that our children are being taught press censorship as acceptable is ludicrous, irresponsible and very simply dangerous. A person

learns by doing, not by doing the opposite.

The responsibility for turning around this situation rests in the hands of our educators, with support from school board trustees and parents.

Educators, in particular, must show the common sense and courage to develop journalism programs which are meaningful. They can begin by hiring experienced teachers who know the basic tenets of journalism, libel law ramifications and First Amendment rights.

At the present, journalism is held in such low regard at most high schools that typically some freshman teacher who very well may not even read newspapers is thrown into the task.

Support of the Jondahl bill would force fearful administrators to sit up and pay attention to our Bill of Rights, a sometimes forgotten part of American freedom.

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

Toward a sinless society

I'M STARTING to change my attitude.

I mean, you get exposed to enough of this politically correct thinking and you begin to wonder if you really are just an old warrior.

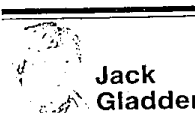
Maybe those PCers out there are right after all. If we can just change the way people think, we can change the world.

So I'm starting to come around. Let's organize the thought police, get out the electric shock couches and get sparking. We'll come up with "Utopia if we have to zap a few people in the process. But in the end, it'll be worth it."

I got my latest idea from the State Bar of Michigan which has asked the Michigan Supreme Court to approve a proposal to forbid lawyers and judges from belonging to private clubs that exclude minorities. It's another one of those ideas that, on the surface, seems to be noble and just.

The reason for the plan, according to a state bar official, is that lawyers should set an example for other people, even in their private lives.

Those who oppose the idea have called it everything from McCarthyism to thought control and argue that it is to trample a person's constitutional right to associate in private with whomever he chooses. Even the American Civil Liberties Union, that archenemy of discrimination, is against the proposal.



Jack Gladden

NOT ONLY WOULD lawyers be expected to obey the rule, but they would be required to rat on their colleagues who violate it. In addition to the club membership part of the plan, lawyers and judges would not be allowed to engage in "invidious discrimination" based on race, gender, age, disability, religion, ethnic origin or sexual orientation. No one seems quite sure what that means, but who cares? Break the rule and you can be brought up on charges.

One lawyer who favors all of this says that such rules can transform society. And she added, the proposal has a "much more laudable goal than someone's First Amendment rights." Whew! And that from a lawyer. But that's the kind of thinking you run into when you try to change society by making up new rules. Ordinarily I'd be against this, but not now. I say let's take the bar association's proposal and make it even better. Down with all discrimination, in deed, word and thought. If you're a member of a religious organization (read that church, synagogue, tem-

ple, mosque or whatever) that doesn't allow someone of another faith to join your group, you can't practice law in Michigan.

THINKING OF joining the American Association of Retired Persons? Forget it. You've got to be 50 or older to join, and that's age discrimination.

And don't even consider joining a women's association or a gay league or any group that has a minority designation in the name. If you have any kind of disability, live with it, but don't join a support group. Discrimination, right down the line. And we don't allow that in our PC society.

You couldn't join a group like Parents Without Partners, because that discriminates against parents who have partners. And if you have a loved one in the Persian Gulf area, for heaven's sake don't join a support group. What about those poor people who don't have anyone over there?

Hey, I could really get into this. Just give me a while to work on it and I'll come up with some rules that will ensure that we evolve into a completely fearless, tasteless, sinless, thoughtless society.

And if that's not Utopia, I don't know what is.

Jack Gladden is a copy editor at the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. He lives in Canton Township.

Observer & Eccentric Newspapers

Steve Barnaby
Judith Doner Berne
Dick Isham
Mark Lewis
Fred Wright

Philip Power
Richard Aginian