

points of view

Prosecutor sent wrong message



Pat Murphy

WITH ONE BIG exception, Oakland prosecutor Richard Thompson probably took the correct course of action when looking into a get-together county commissioners held March 17, while attending a meeting of the National Association of Counties (NACo) in Washington D.C.

But I'm concerned the prosecutor sent a wrong message, namely that a complaint from an individual citizen is less important than one from an organization. In this case a weekly newspaper. I also think the prosecutor reinforced the idea that Michigan's Open Meetings Act is "for newspapers" rather than the general public.

People — as much as institutions or businesses — should be heard. The Open Meetings Act protects the general public as much as the interests of a newspaper.

Here's the background. When Roy Rewold and 18 other commissioners were in Washington, they met to discuss the county's proposed \$500 million solid waste program that includes a controversial incinerator in Auburn Hills.

REWOLD, WHO SAID he first

consulted with the county attorney, explained that he did not intend to circumvent the Open Meetings Act. He just wanted commissioners — Republicans and Democrats alike — to get the most up-to-date information on the solid waste program.

Neither Rewold nor his colleagues — including lawyers experienced in public service as well as the law — believed they were doing anything illegal. "I didn't think the Michigan law applied when we were outside the state," Rewold explained.

Nonetheless, Oakland officials met to discuss a local project — the most expensive and ambitious in county history — at a meeting taxpayers could not reasonably be expected to attend. No decisions were reached, and no action was taken. But the meeting was beyond public scrutiny.

That alone should have prompted conscientious commissioners to boycott the meeting. If commissioners needed to be updated on something of public interest, let it be done in public. That's basic to the intent of any open meetings act.

When they learned of the meeting, many people were concerned and upset. But two filed complaints — the main remedy prescribed in the law. Submitting written complaints on the meeting about the same time were Marilynne Burton-Ristau, the head of RAIL (Residents Against Incinerators and Landfills) who lives in Orion Township, and David A. Gruber, news editor of The Spinal Column, a weekly newspaper circulating in the western part of the county.

At a press conference, however, the prosecutor said he based his investigation on the complaint of the newspaper, with no explanation about why he did not pursue the other — or both. Thompson acknowledged the complaint from Burton-Ristau only in response to questions.

THAT'S THE WRONG message. By responding to the complaint from

the newspaper, Thompson seemed to convey that somehow it had precedence over one from a private citizen. . . as if the concerns of Burton-Ristau were less important.

That's not what the Open Meetings Act intended. It was designed to assure that citizens — as well as newspapers — have access to public forums.

Ignoring the complaint from Burton-Ristau also raises a question. Would the prosecutor's office have investigated the meeting if the newspaper had not filed the same complaint?

The prosecutor could have easily avoided any second guessing. He didn't have to go so far as to base his probe on Burton-Ristau's complaint. All he had to do was publicly acknowledge that her concerns — as much as the newspaper's — were enough to prompt an investigation by his office.

After all, that's what the Open Meetings Act intended.

Pat Murphy reports on Oakland County for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Take a few lessons from school planner



John Telford

FOR SEVEN YEARS as his top assistant, I watched school Superintendent John Schultz of Rochester do one whole of a job.

I have worked for superintendents Mike Hoyer of Plymouth/Canton, George Garver, late of Walled Lake and Livonia, and Bill Keane of Berkeley and the Oakland-Intermediate District.

I am also closely acquainted with other highly knowledgeable CEOs like Bob Docking of Bloomfield Hills, Terry Folbaum of Centerline, George DePillo of Warren and former superintendents Art Jefferson of Detroit, Lew Schulman of Farmington and the hard-driving Sam Flam of Berkeley.

The best superintendents routinely work 80-hour weeks, and they share an eclectic expertise in budgeting, curriculum, personnel deployment and strategic planning. It is in the latter category that Dr. Schultz boasts a near-legendary reputation. His intricate long-range planning model has received national attention.

THE ROCHESTER schools were

no different than most other bureaucracies when he became superintendent. Each department carried out its own plans minus any coordination with other departments. The predictable result: chaos. Schultz and his new leadership team set out to develop procedures for long-range analysis based on corporate methods.

Throughout the winter we surveyed the key players in the district and analyzed the findings. In November we looked at changes in the community; in December the staff underwent scrutiny; in January the topic was enrollment projections, followed by student "profiles" and financial assessments in February and March.

Then we developed likely scenarios if nothing happened to change current trends. Finally, we studied each scenario in terms of SWOTS (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). From this we established long-range goals, concrete objectives and strategies for meeting them.

Annually, we repeated and refined

the process. All of this required an intense investment in time and resources that discourages most other districts from even attempting such an in-depth venture.

IT IS A heightened misfortune that last year with little warning, there came forth from Lansing a political expediency called "categorical recapture" which slashed school reimbursements by millions of dollars (and incidentally caused me to decide to retire to save the jobs of some of my younger staff).

This recapture was accomplished by reduced allocations to districts with high state-equalized property evaluation per pupil. These "out-of-formula" districts are no longer reimbursed for some things such as special education, driver education and student transportation.

Rochester alone lost millions of dollars from this, as well as additional millions for 1991 through the recently enacted residential property tax freeze. Adding to that large and growing district's difficulties is a desperate need to pass a \$31 million bond to renovate deteriorated buildings and purchase land for a bus facility.

Any hope for visionary school planning goes up in smoke when our state government imposes such a cut-of-the-pants legislation that cuts the tall trees in the forest without appreciably nourishing the short ones. In doing this, it had no inkling of the cruel impact on school employees' livelihoods and children's learning environments.

Maybe our governor and legislature could use some long-range planning lessons from John Schultz. John Telford, a Rochester Hills resident, most recently was an assistant superintendent in the Rochester School District. He previously was executive director for secondary education in the Plymouth/Canton district.

Art makes changes in quality of life

THE THOUGHT of leaving the position of Creative Living editor after more than 15 years produces a rush of conflicting emotions.

There will be more time for getting the muscles and the golf swing back in shape — more time to walk and swim, polish the photography skills, do research in the library and take a couple of investment and decorative arts (I never said I knew it all) classes. Course I'm looking forward to more leisurely visits with the kids and grandson — are they gonna be thrilled or what? Yes, these good things and some possible new career directions bring a smile of anticipation.

But, right along with these comes a tinge of sadness. Friends, on their third, fourth or 10th million, are prone to try to comfort me about my lack of extreme, vulgar, financial success by remarking how lucky I am to have met so many interesting people.

Corinne Abatt writes

That's my consolation prize. They say it to be nice, but it happens to be true — in spades. Many of the people I've interviewed have been writers, painters, musicians, sculptors, authors and occasionally interior designers, architects, gardeners and builders.

With the artists, particularly, the act of creating — producing something that has never been seen, heard or printed before — is in a sense a birthing or life-giving process, and as such, it can be intoxicating. What a joy to play even a minor role in all this, especially since the quality of art coming out of this part of Michigan continues to improve.

How can anyone call the teaching of arts in the schools trifles? The act of creation involves innovative thinking and problem solving and carried forward to the respectable amateur or professional level involves math, science, history, philosophy and possibly even biology, botany and cultural studies.

Arts in Michigan have flourished in the last decade or so. Thank the now defunct Michigan Council for the Arts, regional art centers, determined, dedicated community art councils, orchestras and artists groups for that.

And now that the arts have fallen on hard times in Michigan, bet your

last dime, they're not gonna lie down and play dead. I love that quality about people in the arts, so many are doggedly persistent and innovative in approach at the same time. They'll find a way, they always have. It's just that sometimes it gets harder and harder to be a visionary or a seer, to point out the foibles of our society, to make the environment more beautiful, more interesting, more challenging or more exciting. Sure, nobody ever promised these "people a rose garden" — but to all whom I've worked with and written about and to the many I've missed — here's a long-stemmed rose from me for your valiant and heart-warming efforts. We're talking about quality of life — you really do make a difference.

Corinne Abatt is retiring as Oakland County Creative Living editor after 15 years.



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