

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48336

Tom Beer editor/477-5450

O&E Thursday, September 19, 1991

Vote 'no'

C'ville is asking too much

ON MONDAY voters of the Clarenceville School District — which includes a section of southeast Farmington Hills — will be going to the polls to decide the fate of a \$19 million bond issue request. The Observer urges a NO vote on the bond issue.

The request is to approve borrowing \$19 million for a period of 30 years. The debt will be repaid with annual payments generated by an annual debt retirement millage levy not to exceed 4 mills.

If the bond issue is approved, the most additional taxes that will be collected in any given year is 4 mills or \$4 per \$1,000 state equalized valuation. The levy could be less than 4 mills in any given year since Clarenceville, by state law, in any particular year can only levy the exact amount needed to make that year's debt payment.

When 4 mills are levied, the added tax payment for the owner of a \$70,000 house would be \$140.

NO ONE IS pleased about the level of property

taxes needed to support public education. Clarenceville residents, already burdened, pay a total of 41 mills for operation. The prospect of paying 4 more mills is a dim one.

We have no quarrel with the \$19 million loan or with the items to be purchased, renovated or repaired.

We do have a problem recommending that voters approve an additional 4 mills when they are already paying dearly for educational services.

We continue to believe that it is an unreasonable burden in recessionary times to collect an additional 4 mills from homeowners.

We believe that Clarenceville homeowners cannot afford 4 more mills at this point. We urge the school board to consider a more reasonable levy, such as 2 mills, and build the bond issue "backwards" based on what taxpayers can afford.

For that reason we ask Clarenceville residents to vote no on the bond issue Monday and urge the board to come back with a more modest, affordable proposal.

Why not merge libraries?

THERE'S A NEW main public library in Farmington Hills' future, although its location has yet to be decided.

There have been several interesting suggestions, including the merger of the new public library with the Oakland Community College Library on the Orchard Ridge campus. The new library, serving both OCC and the community, would be on campus which is bang in the middle of Farmington Hills.

This library merger is an idea with possibilities. We hope it gets a fair hearing by city and college officials.

Placing the library on campus would heighten the public awareness of OCC and its purpose. We think Orchard Ridge facilities are underused by the general public.

THE COLLEGE has been around for more

than 25 years, but it's our feeling that the community's non-student population has had little to do with it. Town and gown seem to exist in two separate worlds.

And having the library at OCC would take some of the pressure off Peltz-MDOT, that sliver of undeveloped land tucked under I-696 west of Farmington Road.

The Community Library has a portion of the city-owned Peltz land reserved for a new facility — and it may well end up there. But naturalists have made some convincing arguments for leaving Peltz-MDOT in its natural state.

Anyway, with a council election coming up, there's bound to be plenty of comment about the new library's location and Peltz-MDOT. Residents are going to be speaking up on this issue. We hope officials listen well and make sound decisions.

County board

Egos outweigh logic over act

IT'S HARD TO GET excited about county government — especially those big, amorphous bodies called the Oakland and Wayne County boards of commissioners.

But the Oakland County group has made a mistake — one that the Wayne County board, county prosecutor and state attorney general should learn from.

Nineteen of its 27 commissioners met March 17 behind locked doors while attending a conference of the National Association of Counties in Washington, D.C.

Although no decisions were reached and no action was taken, the meeting was beyond public scrutiny.

That's an apparent violation of the Michigan Open Meetings Act and an affront to the public interest, no matter where you live.

THEY WERE MEETING to talk about possibly the hottest issue in Oakland County history: the \$500 million solid waste program, including the controversial incinerator in Auburn Hills. The issue is also one voters will be involved in on Nov. 5, when they vote on a financing proposal — something that needs public information.

Board chairman Roy Rewold called the secret meeting in the nation's capital, then later said he didn't think Michigan law applied because commissioners were outside the state.

According to Oakland County prosecutor Richard Thompson, commissioners were notified of the morning meeting the night before. "One commissioner said he was notified there would be a meeting before leaving Oakland County."

The wife of one of commissioner was excluded from the meeting, Thompson said.

By excluding an Oakland County resident from

the meeting, and subsequently locking the doors, commissioners demonstrated their intent, Thompson said.

THE OPEN MEETINGS ACT says in part: "All meetings of a public body shall be open to the public and shall be held in a place available to the general public. All persons shall be permitted to attend any meeting except as otherwise provided in this act."

Thompson asked the commission to sign an agreement, reached with Rewold, that the meeting "may have constituted an unintentional violation of the Open Meetings Act" and stipulated that future meetings would comply with the law.

By a 19-5 vote they refused, and the prosecutor promptly filed a civil suit against them, seeking a declaration that a violation of the law occurred and asking for an order that future meetings comply with the Act.

Judge Hilda Gage has set a trial for Nov. 25.

The only commissioners who favored the agreement were: Rewold, R-Oakland Township; Frank Millard, R-Sylvan Lake; Larry Crake, R-Waterford; Richard Skarritt, R-Milford; and Donna Huntoon, R-Clarkston.

IT IS TO REWOLD'S credit that he has worked out a way to make amends. Ditto for the four commissioners.

As for the rest, it is apparent that their egos outweigh their logic.

The Oakland County Board of Commissioners must sign the agreement not to violate the Open Meetings Act. It's an act which strengthens the right of residents, regardless of where they live, to know what goes on in government by requiring public bodies to conduct nearly all business at open meetings.

Amendments guarantee universal voting rights

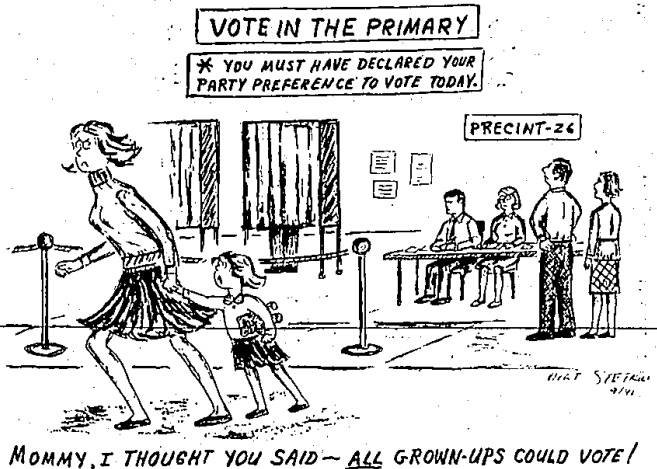
UNIVERSAL voting rights didn't come easily, but were achieved only with the passage of three key Amendments to the Constitution.

The Twenty-Sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971 when many young people were protesting the Vietnam War and otherwise expressing their political views, delivered the right to vote to adult citizens aged 18 years and older. It was the most swiftly ratified Amendment.

The Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ratified in

1964 at the height of the Civil Rights struggle, put an end to the use of the poll taxes that sometimes were used to deny the right to vote to otherwise qualified citizens.

And the Twenty-Third Amendment enabled residents of the District of Columbia to participate in presidential elections. District residents had been clamoring for the vote at least since 1801, but the Amendment that gave it to them was not ratified until 1961. Only later did they get the right to elect non-voting representatives to Congress.



Engler education plan lacks financial backing

GOVERNOR ENGLER last week unveiled in a special speech to the Legislature his long-awaited proposals to improve school quality.

The most important thing about the speech may be that it was given at all. After nine months in office, it is clear that the governor's promise to focus on education is being kept.

Whether Engler's proposals make any sense in substance or in the burly political process in Lansing remains to be seen. My experience is that the politics of school improvement are much more difficult than the substance.

Some parts of the Engler package make more sense than others.

THE EMPHASIS on the young at-risk kids is very good.

The governor wants to spend lots more on all-day kindergarten for them. He wants tutoring for these kids through second grade to give them a good start in math and reading.

Last year, around 10,000 Michigan at-risk 4-year-olds attended state-funded half-day programs, out of an estimated 13,000 eligibles. Another 28,000 children participated in federal Head Start and Chapter One programs.

Research findings — from a University of Michigan study in Ypsilanti — are definitive: Special early help really makes a difference for at-risk kids. As Wayne-Westland Superintendent Dennis O'Neill said, "If we can get kids ready at an early age and get them the appropriate

skills, fewer kids would need help later on."

ANOTHER GOOD idea is to have schools guarantee the basic job-related skills of graduates to their employers.

Pioneered in the Plymouth-Canton school district, the system is simple. Every graduate comes with a warranty that reading, writing, math and reasoning skills are up to snuff. If the employer finds that isn't so, the kid is returned to school and remediated free.

This sensible approach focuses on results. It uses incentives — free remediation — to satisfy customers — employers.

It is unpopular with a lot of school people who are accustomed to passing kids from grade to grade. I get dirty looks when I suggested a version of the idea to state government heavyweights five years ago. Here's hoping the climate in the Legislature has changed since then.

THE GOVERNOR did pay homage to conservative ideology. Schools of choice are to be achieved through something called "charter" schools, partly funded by the state but run by former teachers or private businesses.

Teachers unions are sure to oppose two other good ideas: making it harder for teachers to get tenure and allowing non-certified (i.e., not unionized) people to teach.

Local superintendents remain fearful of more tinkering with the



Philip Power

school aid formula. "The last time the state did something major for education, we lost \$8 million," said Farmington Superintendent Michael Flanagan, referring to the "Robin Hood" bill that shifted \$50 million from rich to poorer districts for the 1990-91 school year.

THE BIGGEST problem remains money.

Take Engler's interest in lengthening the school year from 180 to 200 days. He proposed \$300,000 in incentives for pilot projects — a drop compared with the hundreds of millions needed to do it statewide.

It highlights the "interesting" way the governor is using the state's present budgetary crisis. He can advocate all kinds of improvements for our schools, knowing full well that the money to pay for it just isn't there.

It's a politician's dream, being able to support both sides with nobody around to call him a hypocrite.

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

from our readers

City must pay its bills

To the editor:
An open letter to the residents of Farmington:

I have recently received a letter from Patrick L. Anderson, a Farmington resident, who alleges that the recycling fee adopted by the city council is actually a tax, and an illegal tax at that.

Further, Anderson urges me to advise residents that they are not bound to pay the fee as billed. Anderson writes on the letterhead of Alexander Hamilton Life, and we have been informed that he, or someone, is circulating a similar message to the general print and electronic media of the metropolitan area.

For that reason, I have chosen to answer Anderson publicly.

The ordinance which established the recycling program and set the fees was introduced at the council meeting on May 6, 1991, and adopted at the council meeting on May 20, and that person did not question the validity, or the prudence of the user fee as the means of financing the program.

The authority to establish a fee system to finance the recycling program was reviewed by the city attorney prior to the drafting of the ordinance so that city council would be

in compliance with state law.

THE EFFORTS of the city council to adjust solid waste control practices to rising costs and increasing regulation have been well publicized, including highlighted treatment in the last two community annual reports which are mailed to every resident.

Recycling itself has been highly visible since the recycling center at the Department of Public Services yard opened in 1989.

Following the open and deliberate procedures described above, the city has entered into a contract with Waste Management Inc. to collect recyclables.

We are now well into the third month of recycling and the city is incurring costs which must be paid. The budget provides for paying those costs with the proceeds of the recycling fee which I believe was properly and prudently adopted by the city council. For those reasons, the city has mailed the recycling bills and is collecting the fee.

Upon receipt of Anderson's first letter, the city administration requested an additional review of the ordinance by the city attorney and another respected law firm.

Both firms have assured the city council that the ordinance is properly drawn. Yet Anderson would have us suspend collection of the fee to permit more discussion.

I BELIEVE that the residents of

Farmington have been aware of the recycling issue for at least two years, that they have understood the issue, and that they support the action of the city council as an effective and fair response to a difficult problem.

I can assure the citizens of Farmington that neither the city council nor its administration have been arbitrary or premature in moving forward with the program requirements as established by ordinance. Anderson is simply wrong in his views on this matter.

Anderson is certainly welcome, as are all residents, to express their opinions on this or other subjects that may come before the council, but in the meanwhile, the city must meet its contractual obligation and pay its bills.

Shirley V. Richardson,
Farmington Mayor

Opinions are to be shared

Opinions and ideas are best when shared with others.

Letters should be mailed to: the editor, The Farmington Observer, 21898 Farmington Road, Farmington 48336.

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