

Opinion

21898 Farmington Road/Farmington, MI 48336

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Hills challenge Public distrust is problem

IT'S ALMOST time for the changing of the guard in Farmington Hills.

That is to say, as the new year dawns, two-year councilman Donald Grant takes the reins of ceremonial power from outgoing Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi. And the reins of power will be accompanied with new difficulties.

The premier problem facing Grant and his six colleagues is what to do about the public's continuing distrust.

Never was the problem better illustrated than in the recent brouhaha over the city's proposed plans to replace wetlands from 12 Mile to the city-owned Peltz-MDOT land, south of I-696, west of Farmington Road.

The recent wave of negative publicity and public criticism have prompted some to say the city has a public relations or image problem. Perhaps that's so.

WHEN A GROUP of residents — some members of the city's Peltz-MDOT ad hoc committee — squawked about what they believed were inappropriate closed door discussions on replacing wetlands on Peltz-MDOT, city officials reacted in horror.

"Lies," charged some council members and city administrators. City officials' responses basically have been along the lines of "how dare anyone criticize."

Sorry. Residents do criticize and — more often than not — are right on target. Consistently, however, city officials, particularly council members, use that dreadful "R" word — Resent!

— in response to public criticism.

They always seem to resent something when some members of the public have opinions that differ, however slightly, from the council or city administration.

Grant should be forewarned that much of the public distrust comes the public events before the city council and other boards and commissions.

What leaves a lasting impression are the comments to members of the public behind doors, in the hallways, and at the less-attended board and commission meetings.

THESE COMMENTS have come in all forms by a variety of people, not least of all board and commission members, city employees, department heads, and individual council members.

Responses to public criticism have taken the form of obvious snubs, diatribes on why so and so should not be involved on committees — much less have a chance to make public comments — and downright rude and vulgar jibes.

Grant and his council and city administrators have some fast work to do to raise public opinion beyond where it now stands.

Too many residents, particularly those who dare to get involved with their time and effort, have serious doubts about the city's direction. And, equally important, they have serious doubts about those leading the city.

But some city officials chuck up the often well-founded criticism as coming from the same few people — as though their opinions are not worthy of being heard because they consistently stand up and demand their right to be heard and be involved.

NO MEMBER of the public — no matter how tiresome his remarks may seem — should be mistreated or verbally flogged for criticizing or disagreeing with elected officials and city administrators.

Grant also would do well to recognize that the public resents discussions or decisions made in less-than-public circumstances. Government — even on the smallest scale such as that in Farmington Hills — shouldn't be a mystery or a game of hide-and-seek.

The public wants to know the facts before a decision is made — not weeks later, when there's little anyone can do or say anything about it.

There're far too many local politicians who seem to believe that they and only they have all the answers. That's where the seeds of public distrust are sown.

The solution, however, is simple. Or so it should be. Honesty. No games. No hidden agendas. That's what the public wants. That's what the public deserves.

Looking ahead

Critical issues face our region

THE DAWNING of this new year on the heels of the unprecedented change and economic uncertainty in the previous 365 days brings with it a mixture of doubt, insecurity and hope.

The future viability of Michigan and its southeastern economic breadbasket largely depends on decisions made on specific critical issues.

The following issues are those that we believe are most important for Michigan residents to address:

• **EDUCATION** — We have struggled for years to reach a balance between spending enough for individual school districts and local control of curriculum. Our efforts have garnered a meager payback. While many students are receiving a barely sufficient education, a growing number are receiving less than is necessary to compete and prosper in the world economy. Even more alarming are the number of youngsters who are dropping out and disappearing from the educational experience, altogether.

If we, as a region, are to remain economically sound, we must dedicate more resources and become more innovative in the ways we educate our children and retrain the adult population.

• **URBAN SPRAWL** — Despite the fact that Michigan's population is declining, we continue to build new communities and abandon established ones. The inner ring of suburbs will experience the same fate as the city of Detroit if this exploitation of vacant land continues.

It is up to the business community, as well as government leaders, to call a halt to the urban development warfare that pits community against community and in some cases race against race. Developers, retailers, government officials and residents must be willing to play resources back into their local community rather than abandoning them. If the sprawl continues we all will suffer economically.

• **ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION** — Little in Michigan has received more lip service and received less action than diversification. Yet we remain too exclusively linked to the automobile industry for our economic security. As the hiring power of General Motors and other auto companies declines, we must look to other industries that have brighter futures.

We suggest that health care and the computer industry could be bright spots for providing technical jobs for Michigan's future. We also believe that for once the state get serious about backing

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the already established tourist trade as well as agriculture.

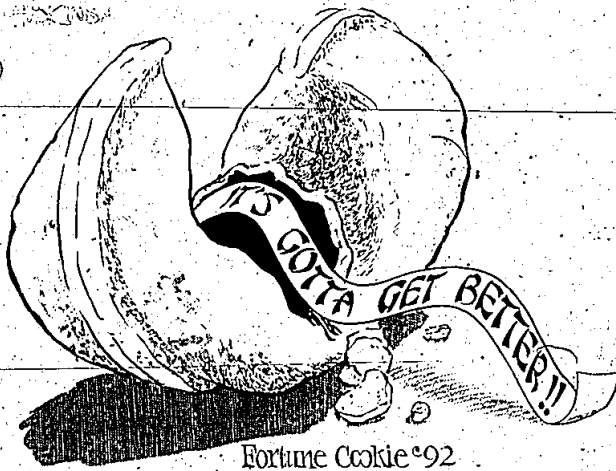
• **TAKING CARE OF HOMELESS** — The economic crisis in Michigan wasn't caused by poor people who are suffering the most. If we are to remain a civilized society, we must dedicate ourselves to helping those who are unable to help themselves. Neglecting this growing problem will only cause us more economic and moral strife in future days. No good excuse exists for rebuilding this state on the backs of the poor.

• **REBUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE** — Taking care of a state is like keeping the house fixed up. The longer we neglect our house the more difficult and expensive it gets to fix it. This is especially true for our roads. Michigan roads are so bad that they're an embarrassment.

It's time for Gov. John Engler and the state Legislature to stop being coy about taxes and think in terms of an increase in the gasoline tax. Michigan fuel prices are lower than neighboring states and, if phased in gradually, the tax would help greatly in making our roads an asset.

• **STUDENT SPEECH** — Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court's Hazelwood decision, many school administrators believe they have carte blanche to put out entire articles and pages from high school newspapers. Voters should insist the legislature pass the "student freedom of expression" bill. It is simply a matter of sound education technique in a democracy to teach our children how to responsibly operate in an atmosphere of freedom rather than repression.

• **CITY/SUBURBAN TIES** — We are brewing a recipe for growing economic distress if we continue to ignore the blight of our central city. We all pay a heavy economic price for the neglect. For many suburbanites, Detroit Mayor Coleman Young has been a bitter pill to swallow. But come 1993, we are bound to have a new Detroit mayor, and suburbanites should be ready to deal with a new voice.



It's time to give American auto industry another try

WHETHER OR NOT you're willing to admit it, the car you buy reflects something about you — and not just your income.

When I was growing up in the northern Detroit suburbs, every car my family bought was from General Motors. This was a combination of the northern suburbs being "GM country" and the fact that my grandfather's die casting plant, although in Cleveland, had GM as its biggest client.

Things changed when I married a conservative, scientific-type from out-of-town, who was less enamored of flashy cars in general than we are in Detroit and who was intrigued by the engineering of Volkswagens.

We bought our first car — a VW bug — in Europe, drove it around for a summer and then shipped it back to New York City, where we would live. It was the perfect car for Manhattan. We also found the engineering claims to be true. It lasted 10 years, although barely making it up the last hill in the Oranges of New Jersey to trade it in on our next car — yet another Volkswagen.

NOW WITH children, we used the VW as the commuter car, and we bought our first Sedan (that's my daughter's boyfriend's nickname for



Judith Doner Berne

a sedan) — naturally, a GM car — a four-door, maroon Chevrolet Impala that actually was a sedan, since I was the primary driver.

Through moves to Houston and to Detroit, we stayed in the VW/GM mode until our first child made it to 16 — then he got the VW — and my husband bought his first (and only) American car — a Chevette. Early on its speedometer broke, seemingly a fairly simple repair, but it turned out the only way it could be fixed was by paying to have the entire transmission removed.

So we learned to drive the speed limit by feel. It also rusted out something awful, torpedoing my husband back into the foreign car market, this time bearing the label "Made in Japan." He drove his silver Toyota for four years, then gave it to our youngest daughter when she was 16. Six years later, she's still driving it. Meanwhile, after two disastrous

bouts with GM products, in 1987 I clenched my teeth and bought a Japanese car. After three years of no worry, no repair driving, more slackjawed, I traded it in for another.

Still, I've always been embarrassed to be driving them, wishing that Detroit could do as well.

NOW MY DETROIT upbringing, the plight of my city and its car-based economy, and the improved ratings of some American cars, such as the Ford Taurus, make me think it's time to give the American car industry another go.

Mike Royko, the syndicated columnist out of Chicago, however, is unflinching. "If it (GM) had not been stuffing customers and had 'made quality products,' there wouldn't have been much of a Japanese and European car invasion. But because of its arrogance and stupidity, General Motors opened the gates and made itself the great, shrinking giant." He strongly suggests he would never buy another GM product.

Royko is probably right. But he's not from Detroit.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

from our readers

'Quiet one' speaks out

To the editor:

After being endorsed by the Observer in the recent election and dubbed the "quiet one on council," I would not want to change your mind about me.

However, you also said I was more into solving conflict than getting into conflict, so please accept this letter in that category.

In creating the Peltz-MDOT Ad Hoc Committee, council understood there were many, somewhat divergent ideas in the community as to the appropriate and desired use for that property.

It seemed very important to structure a committee that would represent the community's various interests in a balanced manner. Concerned board and commission members were invited to send a representative. There would be naturalist at large, two residents from the nearest subdivision and council would send a member as liaison.

When former councilwoman Jean Fox chose not to seek re-election, she was no longer eligible to be the council liaison to Peltz-MDOT Committee simply because she was not a council member.

The logic of requiring one to be a member of council to be a council liaison seems unquestionably clear. The value of not changing the structure or balance of the committee seems equally evident.

OBSERVER headlines saying "Fox ousted from panel" and, "Fox is

dropped from site panel" are simply not informative. There were no stories saying Jean Fox was not elected by council to serve as mayor in 1992, there were no stories saying that she is not going to serve on council as liaison.

By her own decision she is not eligible simply because she is not on council. All meetings of the Peltz-MDOT Committee are public. Public comments are invited. Before any decision is made there will be public hearings.

Citizen input will be encouraged and sought. Certainly, Jean Fox has as great many ideas and much knowledge to share. There will be many opportunities for her and other citizens to do so.

In view of the many long standing requests from citizens to serve on various boards and commissions, I felt that it would have been unfair to give four appointments to any one person.

There is no one whom I would approve for four appointments. As I stated before, if Aldo Vagnozzi recommends Fox for an appointment to any one committee or commission, he and she will have my complete and enthusiastic support.

Nancy Bates,
Farmington Hills councilwoman

Gift of time important, too

To the editor:

I saw a sign of Christmas the other day. It wasn't a Christmas tree, Santa, or a church choir singing carols,

not even the hectic mall traffic.

It was the sight of the Goodfellows Christmas volunteers.

I know it happens every year and I have some idea of the hard work that's involved. In fact I have even helped myself for some years. But I never truly realized the beauty of it all until I saw the happiness in the faces of the volunteers themselves. There were all kinds of people coming together to offer their valuable time to help others in need. I saw cars, trucks and vans leaving the loading docks full of many needed items: Food for people who would go without. Knitwear and toiletries for senior citizens who can't get out. Toys for children who would have none. These are only a few examples.

I know there are many things done for those in need at Christmas. This one was quite a moving sight to see. It also makes me realize how important the gift of time can be.

Anne Marie Diado,
Farmington

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.

Names will be withheld only for the best of reasons, and the decision to do so will be made by the editor.

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

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