

Opinion

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

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Bus-ted? SMART guys must answer

THE SMART guys who run our regional transit system — known ironically as SMART — have some major-league explaining to do.

And we hope that our leaders in the city and township halls, as well as in the State Capitol, will raise a tremendous amount of hell over what these SMART guys' plan to do to suburban bus riders.

Fingers should be pointed, explanations demanded, books examined and maybe a few tables pounded at public hearings before this thing known as the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation dies as planned on March 27.

After all, our pots from Subdivision City to Lansing are elected and appointed to protect the interests of the public — and that public does include the 9,500 Oakland County bus riders who will be left stranded if service ends because of an alleged \$7.7 million deficit.

RIGIT! ABOUT NOW, Farmington-area folks who use the bus lines on Grand River and Farmington Road are kicking the tires of used cars and pricing parking lots in downtown Detroit in case the SMART guys make good on their threats to scuttle the service.

Across the metropolitan area, some 35,000 poor souls will be looking for other rides to work or wherever if the SMART guys slam home the big fist they've raised.

And let's not forget the 500 or so SMART employees who will lose their jobs if service ends and this becomes the largest metropolitan area in the United States without a regional transit system.

Ah, but none of this expensive misery has to happen, we're expecting to hear transit officials say, if only someone — otherwise known as the taxpayers — will chip in to erase this deficit. We're just waiting for that old pay-up-or-else line.

After all, their logic will go, for years state taxpayers forked over a huge subsidy so that a rich man's pro football team could lose in luxurious surroundings.

And when that purveyor of pizza and bad base-

ball decides to get serious about building a new stadium, well, taxpayers probably will help — whether they want to or not.

SO WE MAY be asked to dig a little deeper and save the bus system. After all, Detroit-area residents spend fewer dollars on regional transit than do taxpayers of other metropolitan areas. If we want a better bus system, we're going to have to pay more for it.

But before we pass out the balling buckets and open our pocketbooks, let's get a few questions answered first.

First of all, it seems the financial problems are sudden. It was just a couple of years ago that everything was fine and the bus system's future looked rosy.

SEMTA became SMART and announced plans to add many new lines through Oakland County communities. It seemed that the SMART guys were finally getting wise to the fact that more and more people need to be transported from suburb to suburb rather than from suburb to downtown Detroit.

Now — all of a sudden and with very little explanation in any published news report we've seen — there's this huge deficit. SMART guys, open your books; auditors, sharpen your pencils.

And another thing: Despite what the auto barons would have you believe, other large cities have successful transit systems and people do use them. Check out Chicago's system or Boston's. Even car-clogged Los Angeles is getting into the act with a rail system.

Cleveland — that Mistake By The Lake, the city that used to be every bit the urban hell hole that Detroit is — has an excellent transit system.

Let the SMART guys look at transit that works (there's lots of it, both here and abroad) before they come crying to the public that they've got to quit — and mess up the lives of thousands of people.

And please, leaders of the people, keep those buses running on Farmington Road and Grand River and other suburban speedways until someone figures out what's going on with this mess known as SMART.

Still a crisis End reasons for homelessness

TREES HAVE long ago been taken down, ornaments and colored lights packed away, wrapping papers discarded. The holidays are but a memory.

But homelessness continues. It continues for the people who spend the night at Birmingham Unitarian Church, at the South Oakland Shelter, Royal Oak, at the Wayne County Family Center, Westland and other shelters throughout the metro area.

In November, we asked area residents to be especially generous in remembering the homeless. We're gratified so many people responded, especially during a recession.

BUT WE ALSO asked people to remember the homeless, as best they could, throughout the coming months.

Despite some mildly encouraging signs coming out of Gov. John Engler's office, life appears to be getting worse for our area's homeless.

The long-running recession has put more people out of work, swelling the ranks of the needy. Cuts in government grants haven't helped, either.

"Demand is going up, but we have less to give," is how Bryce Denison of Wayne Metropolitan Community Services Agency described the dwindling food supplies at area soup kitchens.

This doesn't mean we should throw up our hands. There's plenty we can do and plenty of agencies that could use our help.

Wayne Metro, Detroit-based Gleaners Community Food Bank and Pontiac Rescue Mission are but three of the dozens of private, non-profit agencies that could use your support. Many area churches have also become actively involved in providing shelter or assisting area shelters.

Chances are, there's an agency or church right in your home town that could use a hand.

BUT WHILE we're encouraging people to be generous, we know our generosity will only get homeless people through the winter. We also need to mobilize our resources to assure that, in future winters, no one need go homeless.

It's important we provide food, shelter and clothing, but it's also important that we root out the problems that contribute to homelessness.

For too long, we've talked about the homeless as though they were one unified body of people with a unified set of problems.

While all homeless people have a major need — shelter — many have other equally important needs.

A portion of our homeless population is people with severe alcohol or drug-abuse problems.

"Demand is going up, but we have less to give," is how Bryce Denison of Wayne Metropolitan Community Services Agency described the dwindling food supplies at area soup kitchens. This doesn't mean we should throw up our hands. There's plenty we can do and plenty of agencies that could use our help.

Another portion includes people released from mental hospitals.

Still another portion, the fastest-growing segment, includes single mothers with young children.

Others include people, who for whatever reason — job loss, illness, bad luck — lose their homes.

THERE'S NO denying that more, and better paying, jobs would reduce the number of the nation's homeless. But jobs also require a renewed commitment to job training.

More available housing would also be a plus. A quarter-century ago, we declared war on poverty and federal money flowed into housing projects. But federal money for low-cost housing has dwindled, causing that market to all but disappear.

Despite the noble efforts of Habitat for Humanity, few abandoned houses have been re-opened for the homeless, either.

Even though jobs and increased housing would help, more work is still needed to break the back of drug and alcohol dependency.

More also needs to be done to keep families together, as well as preventing teenage pregnancies.

Let's make sure, too, that all mentally ill people receive decent, humane treatment and are not merely dumped into the streets.

Despite recent economic troubles, our nation and our region is still blessed with tremendous wealth and resources. What is lacking is the political will.

This winter, let's do what we can to help the homeless.

But in this election year, let's also make sure our candidates are dedicated to putting an end to homelessness.



LOUI WACHEN Staff photographer

Homelessness

The burden of being homeless is a year-round problem, and we need to abate the reasons that keep it so. For an editorial on

the subject, please see the lower left article on this page

Property tax plans pose risks to state

I'VE BEEN reflecting on Gov. John Engler's state of the state speech last week. The guy who wrote, "If you liked me in 1991, you'll love me in 1992," hit the nail on the head.

This was a political speech, as was the slick videotaped Democratic rebuttal afterward. Themes for the 1994 election are already coming into focus.

Education first. Engler pledged to continue to shovel money at K-12 schools, colleges and universities. Despite cuts in other areas of state spending.

He gave some worthwhile state-wide exposure to the idea of an "education warranty" that would require schools that graduate students who lack minimum skills to re-educate them without charge.

Premiered in Plymouth-Canton schools, the plan seems to be working fairly well, if only because it concentrates on outcomes — what kids actually learn — instead of process — how many years they sit in classrooms.

ENGLER EMPHASIZED his proposal to cut school property taxes by 30 percent and cap the rate of future annual increases in assessments to 3 percent. With 400,000 signatures in hand, it seems clear this proposal will join a competing Democratic one on the ballot this fall.

Most readers of this newspaper have seen the assessed value of their property — and, consequently, their taxes — skyrocket in recent years.

Trying to pay the taxes on a paycheck hard hit by the recession — or, worse, on a pension and Social Security — is very tough. On the surface, Engler's proposal will have a lot of appeal.

That will fade once people figure out just what it will cost. The proposed 30 percent tax cut will cost schools something like \$2.25 billion per year by 1997. The plan requires the state to reimburse an equal amount to the schools.

So, other things equal, in a total state budget which will be something around \$8 billion by 1997, the cut and cap proposal requires shifting \$2.25 billion to schools from somewhere else.

THAT'S A BIG shift, with big political stakes attached.

First example: job training. Other than what's required by federal law (the Job Partnership Training Act, for example), there is no serious job training taking place in Michigan today.

Why? Because Gov. Engler wasted no time dismantling the job training system erected by his predecessor, Jim Blanchard. Gone are the Youth Corps, the Job Start anti-welfare program and the Michigan Opportunity Card.

Now that thousands of Michigan workers are being laid off, the need for job training has never been greater. Yet there is no state initiative in place. And even if the Engler administration gets around to developing one, there won't be any money



Philip Power

to pay for it after the \$2.25 billion is shifted to the K-12 system

SECOND EXAMPLE: Heganesque budgetary shenanigans. It now seems clear that the real reason lying behind our national deficit crisis is a political miscalculation made in the early years of President Reagan's administration. Conservatives erected the following chain of logic: Federal spending is too high. Let's reduce government spending by reducing government income. Therefore, cut taxes.

What happened, however, is that the White House and the Congress got into a feeding frenzy of tax cutting. The resulting revenue slash was far larger than anyone ever intended. It was never balanced by expenditure reductions. Our towering national debt is the result.

Sometimes I wonder whether John Engler doesn't have a similar scenario in mind — and will force Michigan to face similar risks — with the cap and cut property tax proposal.

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

from our readers

Story was 'propaganda'

To the editor: In response to the "abortion rights" article by Tim Smith on Jan. 20, I found the lack of balanced reporting quite irritating.

I'm sure, or at least I hope, that if I were to submit an article on my "right" to gun down innocent people at the post office, this paper would react with horror and focus on (or at least mention) the rights of the persons to be killed.

The right to live their lives would be paramount. Yet in this article, which stated that there are "about 1.5 million" abortions (killings) each year in the U.S., was the word "baby," "child" or "fetus" mentioned even once? No, it wasn't. Secondly, Smith quotes from OCC Professor Keidan who said that the mind-set of the Supreme Court is "because it (Roe) is not in the original Bill of Rights it (abortion) shouldn't

be a constitutionally protected right." But the logic of her next statement is missing. "All kinds of rights are at risk. Possibly eliminable are those rights which govern freedom of speech, search and seizure procedures and Miranda warnings, she added."

Why would freedom of speech, to use one of her examples, be "possibly vulnerable" when it is in the original Bill of Rights?

Such illogical statements are used, and quoted, by those who wish to propagandize, not report.

Sandra Labs, Farmington

Edit was worthy of KKK, Nazis

To the editor: It is ironic that your Jan. 23 edito-

rial contains both salutes to Dr. Martin Luther King and religious bigotry.

Your thinly veiled pressuring of the Jaycees to eliminate persons of a specific religious persuasion from their Prayer Breakfast program is not only censorship, but an act of religious bigotry worthy of the Nazis or the KKK.

These words are harsh, but prejudice is prejudice, even when a Christian is the target. Dr. King would have preferred that we accept, not silence, each other.

Robert N. Ranney, Farmington Hills

Opinions are to be shared

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

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