

POINTS OF VIEW

These winters are to celebrate, not curse

Winter couldn't have picked a better time to return to southeastern Michigan. It's winter break in many public school systems — Farmington's included — right now and the kids are free to make optimum use of that sledding hill by school headquarters. So give the kids credit. They at least know what to do with winter. The rest of us aren't sure we care much for the season. And no wonder, what with the scare job the big-town media throws at us every time a few flakes turn into a flurry.

And it's more than a flurry right now. As these words are being clickety-clicked into my Digital VR201 computer terminal, the white stuff is coming down like... well, like flour from the business end of some comic sifter. Of course, there's another massive snow job raging right now. I'm talking about the one that blows in off the dai-

ly newspaper front pages and television screens every time a storm threatens from the west.

Take Tuesday's blow. It's going to amount to no more than six or seven inches, probably a lot less in many areas. Still, the boob tube weather wimps were all warnings Monday afternoon and evening — before a single snowflake had fallen.

Not to be outdone by the "televisionaries," the two daily newspapers I glanced at Tuesday morning carried front-page stories about the coming snow storm. "Area's walk on the mild side ends," shouted one headline.

So threatened, lots of folks will be content to take part in the three great wintertime pursuits — eating, sleeping and, ah, watching TV.

But come on now, this is winter and we are in Michigan. It's supposed to be cold and it's supposed to be snowy. In this part of Michigan, there will



TOM BAER

be, on average, 10-15 times every year when the old mercury sinks below zero and we can expect about 36 inches of snow, according to a report prepared by the planning director of an Oakland County community.

Now think about it: The past few winters just haven't lived up to those expectations. We've been getting off easy. We're due for a blast or two.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating this February day: Winter isn't always well-managed around here. It isn't only the nitty-gritty stuff like attention to snow highways and sidewalks and cars that won't start.

It's much more that winter simply isn't celebrated in most of our communities.

If there's anything going on in, say, Farmington or Farmington Hills to make the dark, cold days of winter a bit easier to take, we've not heard about it.

But there are places in the northern latitudes that do more than just curse winter and plow it away.

Such places stage huge festivals during which participants lose their wintertime woes with merrymaking, while the cash registers in the business places beep merrily away. Plymouth, Mich., to the south and west of us, is one such place.

Plymouth has become known for its

ice sculptures and winter festival, which have made January one of the top months for sales there, according to some merchants.

There's no reason why, with the proper coordination and planning, communities like Farmington and Farmington Hills couldn't have the same sort of thing going.

A big winter festival right here... maybe on the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College, or along Grand River in downtown Farmington.

Wow, a winter festival here in Farmington. Now that's something to think about on these long cold winter nights!

Tom Baer is the editor of The Farmington Observer. He may be reached by calling 477-5450.

New sports complex dedicated to memorable son

was mad. It was August, and the tennis club I had played at for 15 years was closing. I was forced to scout out another place to play in time for the fall season.

There had been some warning. Two years ago, a Whirleyball operation had taken over two courts of the Centaur Racquet Club at Drake and Walnut Lake roads in West Bloomfield. Last summer, volleyball pits had been dug where four outdoor courts once stood.

Now the remaining six tennis courts were being uprooted for some future addition to Whirleyball rumored to include rollerblading.

Now, six months later, I was skeptical as I drove over to see for myself just what this new U.S. Blades sports complex — the first of its kind in this country — was all about.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkened interior, I saw lots of neon, a giant video screen and two disc jockeys perched in a booth one story up. Then I took in the giant in-line skating rink, a still-under-construction miniature golf course, and a '50s style diner. It's a "Big Chill" like the one in downtown Birmingham, with fare ranging from

pizza to cashew chicken salad to their ice cream and yogurt.

Behind the disco is a video arcade. A pro shop and equipment rental area are still being outfitted. And there's a party room.

As I ventured tentatively toward the rink, an older woman sailed past, her roller blades decorated all over with emblems. Wow, where'd you get those blades, asked a boy who looked to be about 11. "I decorated them myself," the woman called back, over her shoulder.

Helen Fawkes, from Southfield, was watching her son, Sebastian, 8, circle the rink, which also includes a tunnel, adorned with fluorescent graffiti. "We came over the weekend and we're back," she said. She was content to watch.

The Fawkeses were among the 6,500 people who, co-owner Judy Stillman said, lined up to try out the new facility for free Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Mailings were sent to residents of nearby communities, including Birmingham, the Bloomfields, the Farmingtons, Troy and Livonia.



JUDITH DONER BERNE

Stillman, a Bloomfield Township resident, is part of a partnership backing the sports "megaplex" where the rules are clearly marked: No smoking, no gum, no alcohol, no shorts if you're skating.

"We encourage protective equipment" — helmets, elbow and knee pads, Stillman says. "We're trying to make it more macho to wear protective equipment than not to wear it."

Staff members, mostly young, wearing referee-style pin-stripes are abundant and easily seen. "We want the community to feel safe," Stillman says, talking and joking with them as we make the rounds.

The staff is aware that the complex is dedicated to the memory of Stillman's son, David, an Andover High School graduate, who was killed in a freak skiing accident in Switzerland the summer of '91, following his graduation from the University of Michigan Law School.

A hockey player, he had rollerbladed long before it became popular. And he had loved it.

A plaque will be placed on a wall by the front desk. It reads: "Dedicated in memory of David I. Stillman, J.D., Jan. 8, 1965-Aug. 5, 1991, who loved in-line skating, had a zest for life and although short, lived his life to the fullest."

"He knew we wanted to do this (open the rink)," Stillman says. "I tried to make it what he would have loved."

What she hopes it will be a place people go for good clean fun — ages 3 to 90.

"We knew that the youngsters in the community needed it — and the adults, too."

One week night will be earmarked for young people in their 20s; another for

the 30-somethings. If enough adults who can come weekday mornings show interest, they'll open up for them.

"I have a big concern for the people my daughter's age (25) who are running to the bars on Thursday night," says Stillman. "They can come here — and play video games if they're not athletic."

Younger people need a fun, fast-paced place to go where they can be together in an environment which is safe but isn't preachy. Schools and non-profit organizations have tried to come up with these, but except for special occasions (such as the all-night graduation parties), they have generally failed.

Stillman and partners have tackled this head on — both out of commitment and because it has the potential to be profitable.

I applaud their ingenuity. Rollerblading, anyone?

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Dems ignore a chance to forge new coalition

In case you hadn't noticed, both Michigan Republicans and Democrats have held their state conventions.

The GOP gathering was largely predictable. Gov. John Engler pushed something he calls a "taxpayers agenda," a code phrase for slashing both property taxes and state government functions. David Doyle, re-elected party chairman, blamed Democrats for the House Fiscal Agency scandal.

And a bunch of senatorial wannabees twirled and pirouetted in search of what is looking less and less like a fun nomination to run against U.S. Sen. Don Riegle.

The Democratic convention was much more interesting, mainly because of what wasn't said.

There were obligatory praises for President Clinton, salutes to organized labor, bows to women and minorities — in short, the usual Democratic coalition. But nothing — no thing — was said about broadening the coalition in Michigan in the way that got Bill Clinton elected president.

And just now there are two sizable constituencies in Michigan plenty sore at Gov. Engler and ripe for Democratic wooing.

1. Big, rich, largely suburban, out-of-formula school districts.

Engler has persistently attempted to cut local school property taxes without appearing to care about how these districts are going to make up the revenue shortfall.

"A killer of local school districts" was the most charitable, printable description of the plan that would cut \$4 million to \$6 million from many local school budgets in the first year.

But suburbanites, even rich ones, vote often. Lots of them voted for Clinton last November. If Democrats tried to speak to their concerns, they might get into the habit.

2. A complex mixture of park users, fishermen, hunters and outdoor lovers often clumped together as the "moose and geese" lobby.

This group, most visibly led by the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, is unhappy at Gov.



PHILIP POWER

Engler's treatment of things wild over the last two years.

First he tried unilaterally to reorganize the Department of Natural Resources. Next he tried to kill of a bunch of citizen advisory panels, drawing this comment from MUCC executive director Tom Washington: "Perhaps boards and commissions are not the simplest, most efficient vehicle to make policy decisions. That same statement also can be made about democracy."

In 1980 the state paid 70 percent of the operating cost of Michigan's widely admired park system. Since then, the state has shifted the burden to user fees, now accounting for 80 percent of the budget. Staff for parks has been cut by one-third over the past 10 years, and Engler has been heard to wonder about selling some public parks to private companies.

But are state Democrats trying to make points with Michigan's millions of grumpy sportsmen and women? Not so you'd notice.

Last time I looked, Republicans controlled the governorship, the state Senate and half the state House.

Michigan Democrats had a happy convention. They celebrated their victory last November. But they didn't try much to reproduce a winning national strategy at home.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His touch-tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

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