

POINTS OF VIEW

# Tax plans ignore state's varying economies

Here is a central fact about Michigan's economy that advocates of school tax plans have failed to grasp: The price level in the tri-county area of southeastern Michigan is 22 percent higher than the rest of the state. If you fail to understand that fact, you can do suburban schools a lot of harm in the name of "reform."

A hospital association put together a study of 16 costs a few years ago that showed:

- Home construction in the tri-county area costs 22 percent more than out-state. These costs drive our property tax assessments.
- Public education: 22 percent more.
- Hospital care: 18 percent more.
- Dental care: 19 percent more.
- Residential rent: 44 percent more.

What are the chief costs of public school districts? Salaries and health care.

In addition, we pay 65 percent more

for home insurance, 44 percent more for trash collection, 34 percent more for auto repairs, 32 percent more for auto insurance — and so on. The only break we get is to pay 6 percent less for gasoline.

Teachers here must pay those costs, too. Understandably, they want comparable wages.

Most politicians don't grasp that. Gov. John Engler is pushing a plan to reduce school property taxes 20 percent. The state would reimburse poorer districts, through the school aid formula. But suburban districts in the metropolitan area — mainly out-of-formula — would take the loss on the chin.

I asked Engler about this region's 22 percent cost differential, and the man from Mount Pleasant replied: "That is an excuse, not an answer. And it certainly isn't an explanation. They (suburban school districts) have negotiated the contract that they're now having difficulty affording."



TIM RICHARD

Engler's advice to these districts: "Stop giving double-digit pay increases over a period of two or three years." A snappy answer, but unrealistic.

Are we going to tell teachers in (say) Farmington who pay 34 percent more for auto repairs and 44 percent more for rent that they should be content with the wages of Saginaw or Engadine?

I fled the same question past a member of Team 14, the bipartisan group of legislators proposing a \$4,700

per pupil "equity" in school resources. She said she had heard the same kind of argument from Detroiters, who want all sorts of compensatory money because of their problems. Again, a snappy answer that failed to address economic reality.

Michigan has two economies. If both Sturgis and Livonia schools have \$4,700 cash per pupil, Livonia has only \$3,552 in "real" terms, to use Adam Smith's phrase, because of the price differential.

Novi, Northville, Plymouth-Canton, West Bloomfield, South Redford, Bloomfield Hills, Southfield, Troy, Rochester and a few I've skipped will get a royal shaft — the shaft of economic ignorance — under these plans.

We came to the Michigan Education Association plan. You might guess a reform plan espoused by a teachers union would be self-serving, and you would be right.

MEA would consolidate 562 school

districts into 34 duchies called "financial districts." But there is a dirty trick here. What happens to the most expensive tri-county area? Wayne County winds up in a district with Monroe, Oakland with Lapeer and Genesee, and Macomb with the farmlands of the Thumb.

Thus, MEA would try to use justifiably higher wage levels in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb to increase wages in the outstate economy. It's the backwards version of Engler's idea of evening out costs.

To be fair, any tax cut and school reform plan must take account of economic reality. Everybody has to pay more for nearly everything in southeastern Michigan. Our school boards must have leeway and tax tools to deal with that reality, not be forced into artificial molds.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events. His office phone is (313) 349-1050.

# 'Death's spotlight' casts shadow on ringmaster

It is once again becoming fashionable to be discreet. The problem is that it isn't happening fast enough.

Discretion as a virtue was abandoned during the past 12 years. The art of being judicious in one's conduct and speech, particularly in regard to something of a delicate nature, was thrown aside in favor of conducting one's intimate affairs in a highly public, tactless fashion.

Rather than view the indiscreet with scorn, the public has richly rewarded their conduct — the proliferation of tell-all television talk shows stands as the best evidence. There isn't an issue on earth that hasn't had a public airing with its self-appointed savior, a person who seems to know everything except the amount of damage he's causing.

Which brings us to Jack Kevorkian, ringmaster of the indiscreet. It is time to separate him from his self-appointed position as spokesman for euthanasia.

The indiscretion of Vaudeville Jack — He Who Tap Dances in Death's Spotlight — is causing local and state authorities to kill the message with the messenger.

This isn't about pros and cons of

mercy killing, or the correct circumstances for such an act. None but the most cruel would wish on another the responsibility of making such a decision; unfortunately, any decent citizen is capable of citing the likely percentage of those among us who indeed will be faced with such a decision.

It's easy, lacking urgency, to say you'd never approve a set of circumstances that would lead to the death of a horribly ill friend or family member. When faced with such a decision, though, absolutes tend to dissolve and all options are weighed.

That is, all options are weighed if they are available. However, Kevorkian's obsession with assisted suicide has cast him as a fanatic, and guilt by association has made euthanasia the target of every lawmaker for miles.

Don't let Kevorkian be the only source of information for an act of such courage and sadness. The Dutch Parliament just legalized euthanasia under certain circumstances. In the Netherlands, euthanasia is viewed as a dignified, discreet last option for the terminally ill and administered by practicing doctors after a variety of tests prove the patient is sane but overcome by a terminal affliction.



PHILIP SHERMAN

Many doctors, if guaranteed immunity from prosecution, would confirm this has been going on in Michigan and many other states, in a discreet way, for years. So long as it wasn't epidemic, or the fuel for a public relation's campaign, most lawmakers looked the other way.

Stories in The New York Times have chronicled such deaths. Usually, the doctor visits the home of the patient after he or she has agreed to the procedure and all other conditions have been met. With family members present, the doctor again asks the patient if euthanasia is his intention. If so, the doctor injects the patient with a drug and the patient dies.

After that, the doctor is obliged to call the police and advise them of a death by assisted suicide. The doctor does not have an attorney who holds press conferences in the patient's driveway. The doctor's attorney does not accompany the doctor on national and local talk shows. Videotapes of the death do not show up on the six o'clock news. The doctor's attorney does not publicly spar over the issue with the local prosecutor.

Many doctors, if guaranteed immunity from prosecution, would confirm this has been going on in Michigan and many other states, in a discreet way, for years. So long as it wasn't epidemic, or the fuel for a public relation's campaign, most lawmakers looked the other way.

Kevorkian's antics, though, have de-

fied discretion and caused mercy killings to be publicly reviled. Legislators who ordinarily would have passed on this issue find instead that they must come down against it because of Kevorkian's behavior.

The best way to short-circuit Kevorkian is to take away his public platform. He's struck once in Southfield — his closest call yet to the suburbs of Detroit. Some say he's trying to beat the clock imposed by the Legislature, which makes his activities a crime punishable by a jail term as of April.

Instead of slowing down, it looks as though Kevorkian is speeding up to beat the deadline. Each time he succeeds will make it harder for someone else after the law goes into effect.

Denounce Kevorkian — not his objective. If you're unfortunate enough one day to find yourself in the position of making such a life and death decision, don't look back and curse Kevorkian for robbing you of the ability to make your own decisions.

Curse him now.

Philip Sherman is the editor of the West Bloomfield/Lakes Eccentric. His telephone number is 644-1100, Ext. 264.

# 'Bubble' mentality lacks real world knowledge

While I jog in the evenings, I like to listen to National Public Radio's evening news show, "All Things Considered." It stimulates the mind while the running pumps up the heart.

A while back I listened to a story about a woman who was appointed head of the welfare department in New York City. First thing she did was go out and pretend to be a person in need of welfare. She went to the various offices, filled out all the different forms, got abused and ignored by the assorted bureaucrats.

She learned a lot about what it feels like to need welfare. And she is now changing — big time — the policies and practices of the welfare department she was appointed to run.

The story got me thinking.

First, it demonstrates perfectly why most of the people who run the government and make the laws are badly out of touch with the realities of ordinary folk. They are much too much "in the bubble," all of them. And this fact accounts for much of the disconnect between political and governmental elites and ordinary folks that plagues our politics so badly.

Second, it seems to be that much of the mainstream news media, too, are in the bubble. Often, the only people reporters and editors regard as legitimate news sources are heads of governmental departments, legislators or other "news makers."

Only rarely do reporters — especially ones in Washington or Lansing — ever talk with ordinary people who are on the receiving end of governmental indignities and inefficiencies.

These two factors are important in the rise of talk shows and so forth, "real media" as distinguished from elite media.

They should also be important to community newspapers like this one. If we are doing our job as good community newspapers, we can never allow ourselves to get trapped, by habit or choice, in the bubble.

We ought to be talking with ordinary people in the communities we serve, finding out from them what it's like out there. Were the streets



PHILIP POWER

on the west side really plowed after the snowstorm last weekend? What's it really like to be a business owner in search of a building permit? Go into real classrooms and see what real teachers do with real kids.

That's real community journalism. Sometimes we do it, and sometimes we don't. But we must realize why it's so important to do better.

Remember the famous legend of the good emperor of China? Recognizing that he was irredeemably trapped in the bubble by his mandarinate's bureaucracy, he regularly donned a disguise and went out into his country. In taverns and inns, by the side of streets and in hovels, he discovered what his government was doing to his subjects and what they felt about it.

Whether true or not, this legend has persisted in China for more than a thousand years, testimony to the power of the myth and the analysis.

There are a lot of office holders and elected officials (not to mention folks who work for this newspaper) who could learn a lot from this story.

Years ago, when Bill Milliken was governor of Michigan, he had a rule for all his top appointees: Get out of Lansing at least one day a week. He learned. And he was a fine governor for our state because of it.

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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