

POINTS OF VIEW

We must look beyond trends for tax reform

I read with interest the suggestions made by Leonard Weems of Farmington Hills regarding replacing school funds lost to property tax reform in the Sept. 16 "letters" column.

While I believe Mr. Weems is a reasonable and well-meaning member of our community, I feel he has failed to accurately assess the situation. If I may, please allow me to respond to some of his suggestions.

I do not believe that voters desperate for tax relief could be persuaded to accept a higher sales tax. Further, what would be the ramifications on the poor who would be paying more for everyday goods and services that they can scarcely afford now and on sales figures for businesses who sell high-ticket items like appliances and automobiles?

While it is "on trend" today to bash smokers and the tobacco industry, let's examine the reality of this position: R.J. Reynolds just announced today that they are laying-off 10 percent of their workforce and the cigarette price wars have begun in earnest.

Sin taxes not new
Cigarettes and alcohol have already

been hit hard by so-called sin taxes. Are we going to tax these industries out of existence?

What will become of the displaced workers and how will we make up for the tax revenue lost by their unemployment? How will this impact the employment stability of import-export, insurance, restaurants, convenience stores, trucking, etc.?

Regarding the taxing of pop and soft drinks we need to consider that many families facing economic hard times will cease buying this item as it is not a dietary necessity. If non-essential products are taxed at a level that deters their sale, does this not also cause a loss of jobs?

As the current pay scale for teachers accounts for benefits received, requiring these individuals to pay benefits out-of-pocket will only facilitate the need for salary increases due to benefits lost.

It is possible that implementation of reduced benefits could result in district-wide strikes thus depriving students of the right to an education until a settlement is reached.

GUEST COLUMNIST



JILL RODABAUGH

Have teachers pay

It is also possible that requiring teachers to pay for their own retirement benefits may exacerbate the already difficult task of luring qualified individuals into an often under-paid profession.

Eliminating the 562 school districts would cause a significant level of local jobs lost while bursting the seams of an already bloated state government.

If you think it is difficult to resolve educational issues at a local level, can you imagine the scope of the problems trying to do this at the state level?

Perhaps a better course of action would be to consolidate districts based upon geographic proximity. This would minimize job loss and maximize utilization of existing facilities. In some areas, consolidations have been very successful and cost-effective.

While I agree that the present school calendar year is outdated and should be changed to better reflect the needs of today, to extend the school year to 240 days at eight hours per day would mean an increase in the school budget of approximately \$2 billion. If the current \$8 billion budget is problematic, \$8 billion is nearly impossible.

Employers' role

Perhaps we should look to the future employers of these students to contribute to the benefits they have for so long enjoyed. This contribution, however, should not only be measured in terms of dollars, but also in curriculum development, equipment, and the actual training itself.

Perhaps the following scenario would benefit all parties concerned: implementation of an extended school year with time-sharing arrangements between the school system and the business world.

This would shorten the number of hours per day for teachers (thus eliminating salary disputes with the unions), and allow for businesses to provide "real world" training for credit.

I do realize, however, that the burden cannot be carried by businesses alone, and suggest that we also look to the wealth of talented individuals within the community itself.

We cannot shift tax burdens from one pocket to another. True reform is only possible when the system is analyzed in its aggregate form and fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement are eliminated.

Requesting a budget for what we want/need is not practical. Using what we already have in an efficient manner is not only practical, it is essential.

Jill Rodabaugh, a Farmington Hills resident works for the Merit Group, a local consulting service.

LETTERS

County Dems offer solutions

I would like to reply to James Hardin's letter of Sept. 23 in which he accused Democrats on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners of constantly finding fault with Republicans without offering constructive remedies.

In regard to "finding fault," the role of the board of commissioners is to be a check and balance on the executive and judicial branches of county government. We are not elected to be rubber stamps.

In terms of "constructive remedies," these are just a few examples of Democratic actions:

1. Although Democrats have tried to reduce the county annual millage rate for the past several years — to reflect the county's financial surplus and reduce property taxes — the majority party has rejected each attempt.

2. After trying for 10 years to eliminate the county executive's private \$1 million police force (safety division), Democrats finally succeeded in 1991.

3. Democrats, after a decade of trying, were successful in 1992 in reducing the county's extensive private passenger fleet.

4. Democrats have been the only party on the board to present annual platforms outlining the solutions for problems facing the county.

5. It was the Democrats who years ago developed the concept of contracting the sheriff's department personnel to the various townships instead of giving away the service for nothing.

I agree with Mr. Hardin that public officials have the right to endorse the candidates or issues of their choice. But please don't do it with public funds, public employees or public stationery.

Such activities are forbidden by the ethics codes of the county commission and the county

executive as well as the county's merit system rules. Rules apply to everyone, including the executive.

The record clearly shows that Democrats have always articulated positive programs to improve county services while at the same time maintaining vigilance over the actions of employees, appointees and elected officials.

I believe this is the reason the public elected us.

Lawrence R. Pernick, Southfield
County Commissioner, District 20
Chairman, Democratic Caucus

Special interests put lock on changes in education

You people in Michigan deserve a lot of credit," said the man at the resort, putting down his gin and tonic with an admiring smile. "You blew away the entire property tax! Now you can get something serious done!"

Ever since the Legislature this summer obliterated the property tax supporting public schools, virtually every non-Michiganian I have met has said much the same thing.

In part, it's people looking for a subject to start a conversation. But behind their slightly surprised admiration lurks an important public perception about our politics.

Most people now believe it takes a full-blown crisis to force our paralyzed political system to act.

Why? Evidence, for one. In Michigan, for example, our politicians have been dithering about school financing for a quarter of a century.

During this period, property taxes have soared, per-pupil funding differences between districts have grown, total spending has shot up and our kids still leave school largely unprepared for the competitive world of work.

And what have we received from our political leaders? Wringing of hands and flapping of gums; that's about all.

Why is this so? Blame the system. Because they regard holding office as their life's profession, our politicians are terrified of doing anything that might make anybody mad — which means they're scared of doing nearly anything.

More to the point, the political system is infested throughout by special interests acting through lobbyists who grease the permanent re-election campaigns with contributions. In return, they demand a veto when something comes up that affects their turfs.

In the case of the schools, the interlock of the special interests is so total as to earn the nickname "the Iron Quadrilateral." It works like this:

In one corner are the teachers unions, whose interest in the status quo is matched by the school superintendents and their organization in the second corner.

Both these corners are connected to the third, solidly dominated by more than 600 locally elected school boards in the state. And all three of these corners are linked to the publishers of



PHILIP POWER

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school books and other instructional materials, whose profits are most effectively safeguarded by resisting changes (and the costs of putting out new editions).

To move any one point in this closely interlinked system requires moving all. That's why the political outcome in matters regarding education, school finance and student performance has been nothing more than a kind of gudging incrementalism.

From this analysis arises the hope of today. With the entire basis of school financing eliminated, the political system will be forced to take some definitive action or face chaos.

We will hear Oct. 5 Gov. John Engler's initial proposals for school reform. As the debate kicks off, let's hope that the "action in the face of crisis" theory holds true.

Otherwise, all of us — especially our children — will be in deep trouble.

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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