

Travellin'
man: Farmington Hills council candidate Ben Marks racked up about 25,000 miles without leaving the state during his "tour" of duty as president of the Michigan Municipal League.



SHARON LEMIRUX/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

He goes extra miles with message

Ben Marks was recently recognized by the Michigan Legislature, the governor and his own city council for his efforts as president of the Michigan Municipal League.

But some (re) company will probably also appreciate his efforts to bring his message of home rule to 154 communities throughout the state.

"I drove 25,000 miles and never left the state," said the 26-year Hills resident. "I spent a week in the Upper Peninsula in July and visited eight cities there."

Marks said he was proud to be, up to now, the most traveled MML president in the group's history. But it hasn't all been a pleasure trip.

"People really appreciate that I'm trying to take their concerns about home rule to Lansing," he said. Marks has been presented with keys to cities, plaques and sweat shirts recognizing his visits or boasting about the qualities of the places he's visited. There have been some unusual stops.

"One of the most interesting places was Mindon, in the thumb," he said. "They have their meetings at the fire hall garage. They have to pull the fire truck out to have their meeting."

Marks, a former mayor and charter commission member, said some small city councils even met in bars.

"That was real Americana," he said.

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used to," Marks said. "If we don't make our voices heard, we won't have any control."

In addition, elected representatives on the state and national level listen to locally elected officials more readily than to city managers and other "hired guns," he said. And that's important for a city that wants to be responsive to its own citizens.

"We decided 20 years ago that we didn't want high-rises in the city," Marks said. "We have a law on the books."

Marks maintains that local officials are more attuned to what their citizens want in terms of zoning, streets and a host of issues, than are state and national representatives. And he's been working to have those local interests taken into consideration before laws that conflict with local ordinances are put on the books.

The longtime builder said the city has won some battles for local control — such as helping defeat a proposed energy tax — and lost some — such as a state ordinance

concerning lawn care and chemical spraying. But overall, local governments are getting more involved.

The next few years will be important for the city because of the lack of new development dollars and growth north and west of the city, said Marks.

"We have to pay close attention to zoning in the Eight Mile/Inkster area," he said. "We can't let it get away like it did for Southfield on Eight Mile and Greenfield."

Marks sees other issues as challenges for the years to come, such as:

- Maintaining the city's parks and continuing to balance active and passive uses.
- Continuing road improvements, especially the M-102/Haleside area and the Hagersty Connector project.
- Using a limited budget wisely in order to keep services, especially police and fire protection, at a high level while continuing to de-

liver programs, such as the senior programs at Mercy Center, to residents.

Marks said council members should be held to a high standard of ethics. He said the city is awaiting a report from an ethics committee, but doesn't expect the committee to actively police elected officials in the future.

Marks — who won re-election to a four-year term in 1989 despite a public outcry in August 1988 over bounced checks and a delay in paying a sewer tap-in fee — said citizens have a right to be heard at council meetings on any issue.

"I think so long as they're not repeating themselves, you should let them talk until they run out of breath," he said.

Marks, who has been married 51 years to his wife, Shirley, is the father of four and grandfather of six. He is a 26-year Hills resident.

"I think my experience can help the city," he said. "And I listen. I take time to empathize with another person's point of view."

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