

POINTS OF VIEW

Legislative tax reforms — now that's scary

Our Legislature scores a lot of hits. For decades Michigan has been talking school tax reform. Then the Legislature in July decided to repeal \$6.3 billion in property taxes, 65 percent of schools' money. Now it's October, and not one dollar has been replaced.

Q. Wasn't it irrational and unwise to repeal public schools' main source of revenue without a replacement plan?

A. Irrational, no. Unwise, yes. Legislators make big decisions only in a crisis. So they manufactured a crisis.

Give credit to Gov. John Engler, who wasn't afraid to take the big gamble. His predecessor would have asked for a study commission and six polls to test the wind.

Give credit to Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Democrat who would replace Engler. She sponsored the substitute for Sen-

ate Bill 1. It's an issue, but not a partisan issue.

Q. But still you say the decision was unwise?

A. Yes. In the first place, the state wiped out \$6.3 billion in revenue, but at most can raise just \$3.8 billion. That's because of the 1978 Headlee amendment, which limits state taxation to a fixed percentage of personal income. So there's a troublesome \$2.5 billion gap.

Second, SB 1 also wiped out several hundred million of county revenue — collection fees, delinquent taxes, delays in assessments' taking effect.

Don't be surprised if in 1994 a lot of angry county commissioners challenge incumbent state legislators from their own party.

Q. Let's get back to the manufactured school revenue crisis. Aren't you worried lawmakers and the governor won't reach agreement on new taxes?

A. Not much. Check Art. VIII Sec. 2 of the state constitution: "The Legisla-



TIM RICHARD

ture shall maintain and support a system of free public elementary and secondary schools as defined by law."

If the Legislature fails to write new tax laws, it could be hauled into court. Michigan lawmakers couldn't be sued for failing to provide "equity" in school funding, as happened in other states. But they easily could be sued if they fail to "maintain and support" public schools at all.

If there's anything a governor and lawmakers abhor, it's a court telling them to levy taxes. I say there will be a tax deal by Dec. 31.

Q. What is this Dec. 31 deadline to pass replacement taxes? The repeal of the school property tax doesn't take effect until next July 1.

A. True, but there's still great pressure to act by Dec. 31. If the Legislature passes new tax laws with a bare majority by Dec. 31, they take effect about next April 1. That's OK.

But if new taxes aren't passed until 1994, it will take a two-thirds vote to give them immediate effect. Our legislators won't run that risk. Actually, they'll act by Dec. 30, because Dec. 31 is a Friday, and they'll want a long weekend.

Q. You mentioned the gap between \$6.3 billion in eliminated property taxes and \$3.8 billion in higher state taxes. How will that be filled?

A. Two ways. First, we'll see local school districts given optional taxing powers — probably a restored property tax.

Second, there will be some effort to

cut overall spending. I think Engler's magic number is \$1 billion. His chief issue is reducing the cost of government. He wants a nice, fat, round number like a \$1 billion net tax cut for his 1994 campaign.

Q. Is it realistic to think we can squeeze \$1 billion more out of government?

A. No. Engler, the Republicans and many Democrats will hold out for competitive bidding on school employees' health insurance, to the chagrin of the teachers union. Maybe they can squeeze \$100 million there.

Maybe they can squeeze \$100 million out in other ways, like privatizing school buses.

Q. You seem convinced the Legislature will do the right thing, not for the sake of kids in school, but for their own political skins.

A. Yes.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. His office number is (313) 349-1700.

Library rejection marks a sad chapter

The recent voter rejection of a new Farmington library should be regarded with genuine alarm and dismay.

From my vantage it is one more nail in the coffin — one more sign that we are succumbing to Neanderthal thinking. How on earth can anyone believe that this community does not need to expand its library in what has come to be known as the Information Age?

Walk into the library today and look at what new research tools are available. Note the Info Trac and microfiche, not to mention the audio and videotape collections and the special section for business research. Consider the number of periodicals that have proliferated as the result of new technology and new lifestyles, and the crunch that the library must experience in deciding which of these numerous publications should be ordered — and stored. Dare I mention the in-

creased cost of books themselves?

From the time I was a child, there was a kind of magic associated with a trip to the library. Imagine being able to carry away eight or 10 books for free. Of course, in those days we laboriously wrote out a separate slip for each book, carefully copying all the required data with tiny pencils and aching hands.

Now, of course, there is the wonderful automated circulation system, one more added expense for the library, even though it was partly funded by a federal grant. But the books are still free folks, and the sheer task of doing inventory and storing so many more volumes surely strains the existing budget.

During the 21 years I have lived in this community, I have used the library frequently. I have always been impressed by what it offers, and the many services it has added over the years in response to expanding needs. I

GUEST COLUMNIST



EDIE BROIDA

have often wished the hours could be expanded to accommodate the early-birds and night-owls who have trouble with the present schedule.

But I never dreamed that the recent library proposal would be rejected by

voters — or perhaps I should say ignored by so many voters, considering the scanty turn-out. What is even more frightening is the rhetoric prior to the election that stated the library isn't always "crowded," and, therefore, we need not build a new one. I cannot imagine a more important institution in this community or any community than the public library. It serves toddlers and senior citizens, students and readers of all ages. And they all use it without charge.

Why am I so alarmed? Quite frankly because there is this insidious anger of late that threatens to sabotage our children's future. It is an anger that says we should not vote money for our schools or our libraries — that we cannot trust our doctors or lawyers or teachers or politicians — and, therefore, we're going to vote against everything.

This anger will lead us back to the Dark Ages when there were no libraries and no schools, and the acquisition of knowledge was virtually suspended. This anger is going to undermine our government and our institutions if we don't acknowledge it and respond to it. This continuous onslaught against schools and libraries of late, suggests a kind of sickness and, untreated, it may be fatal.

I, for one, would like to see this anger replaced with the acknowledgment that yes, it isn't a perfect world, but voting against millage for schools and bonds for libraries will definitely make it even less perfect. We must be careful that backward thinking doesn't move us backward in time.

Edie Broida is a Farmington Hills resident.

Officials choose family life over demands of politics

Don Riegle's decision last week not to seek re-election to the U.S. Senate did more than throw Michigan politics into a turmoil.

Riegle's main stated reason for not running — to spend more time with his wife and two young daughters — highlighted a subtle and troubling aspect of our political system.

Increasingly, politics and families don't mix. Or, at least, running for serious elective office and a reasonably sane family life are terribly hard to reconcile.

The demands of campaigning are enormous. You work down to midnight at the highest possible pitch, seven days a week, until the voters determine your fate.

The demands of holding office are, if anything, more severe. Bound to your job in Lansing or Washington, you still feel compelled to get back to your district on weekends.

Got an evening free with the family? Go to the fundraising reception or the union local meeting. Your son has a baseball game? You've got to make the vote on the floor or see an important constituent.

President Johnson's wife, Lady Bird, once said that politicians should be born orphans and remain bachelors. Look carefully at the children of any seriously ambitious politician; more likely than not, you'll see a troubled kid.

Don Riegle's not the only Michigan politician who chose family over office.

Bill Brodehead, a respected Democratic congressman from the Detroit suburbs, surprised a lot of people in 1982 when he announced he wasn't running again. "I realized the only person getting something out of Congress was me," he said.

Contemplating in July a run for Riegle's Senate seat, Congressman Fred Upton, a well-regarded Republican from southwestern Michigan, declined because the statewide race would hurt his family.

And former U.S. Rep. Bill Schuette, a Republican who lost a Senate race to Carl Levin in 1990, decided last month he wouldn't run against Riegle. When he first ran for Congress 10 years ago, "I was single and could work 24 hours a day. Now, I work just as hard and am as ambitious and driven as ever, but I like to come home early."



PHILIP POWER

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gled's stated reasons against making another race, I don't. He's not alone in choosing family over high office.

So what is it about our political system that keeps requiring this zero-sum game? Certainly the over-exalting demands of fundraising can consume any free time available. And as our politics have become ever more professionalized, the permanent campaign has become part of the political landscape.

Worse, these working conditions tend to define the kinds of personalities that self-select a political career. Driven. Ambitious. Egocentric. Single-mindedly obsessive.

And that's why so many ordinary people feel so disconnected from the political system — and from the sometimes very odd and occasionally unbalanced decisions the people who inhabit the system tend to make.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. He also was administrative assistant for a U.S. representative and, in 1978, a candidate for the U.S. Senate nomination. His touch-tone voice mail number is (313) 353-2047 ext. 1880.

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