

POINTS OF VIEW

Distinct identity planned for classic small town

The New Year began by dealing a triple whammy to Birmingham, a community that is struggling to maintain its reputation as the classic small town downtown in the metro area.

The future of the Birmingham Theatre is in doubt. Although the theater has seldom produced top-notch entertainment, it was still somewhat of a draw to town, especially for the restaurants.

The Townsend Hotel declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy, although the hotel president says his financial reorganization won't affect operations.

The Townsend is the centerpiece of Birmingham's rising crown of elegance, a place where visiting celebrities, business travelers and relatives can stay in first-class accommodations. And where area residents, organizations and busi-

nesses can hold parties, celebrations and banquets with style and taste.

The director of the chamber of commerce resigned. Let's Eick more than doubled the membership of the Birmingham-Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce in her two years in the job. The Birmingham YMCA will now take advantage of those skills, for a salary the chamber couldn't match.

Any one of these occurrences would be a blow to a downtown mobilizing to ward off competition from an up-and-coming Royal Oak to its south and an expanding, world-class Somerset Collection mall in Troy to its east.

Still, for the first time in recent years Birmingham is in a position to rebound.

That's because the city now has a state-legislated Principal Shopping District (too bad that name is such a



JUDITH DONER BERNE

mouthful), with authority to collect taxes to fund a coordinated plan to promote the city.

And, for the first time, there's a plan to fill Birmingham's empty store fronts with a retail mix that projects an identity different from Royal Oak, yet doesn't compete with Somerset.

Still, it's not a small situation where owners can direct and create their own retail mix and message. The Birmingham merchant community has a history of divisiveness - chain vs. mom and pop, retail vs. restaurant, and nowhere to quite fit the growing numbers of financial institutions and professionals who are taking over storefronts once built for retail.

And the PSD so far has had a rough start - what with the grumbings over who should pay what tax and the difficulty of having to abide by the rules that govern a public, tax-funded institution, which the PSD is, rather than a private, dues-paying organization, such as the chamber.

Now with the PSD tax issue settled for this year, Birmingham's downtown must forget its differences and present a united front such as is happening in

Royal Oak and Rochester. Meanwhile, both Southfield and Troy are taking steps to revitalize their commercial areas.

This is also a time for looking at the roles of the chamber and PSD and whether next year they should be broken off, with the chamber primarily servicing the non-retail community and the PSD the retail. After all, PSD stands for Principal SHOPPING district. Obviously that would call for an adjustment in the taxing formula.

Meanwhile, new blue, snow-flake-studded Birmingham banners line city streets, others to come on a seasonal basis. Let's hope they signal the start of a new cohesion and image for this classic downtown.

Judith Doner Berne is managing editor of The Eccentric Newspapers. You can reach her at 901-2553.

Superintendents must balance finance, public relations

QUESTION: I've been a high school teacher for over 27 years. During that time I have seen five superintendents in our district come and go. Now our district is looking for a new superintendent. What qualifies do boards of education look for in a new candidate? Why didn't you ever become a superintendent?

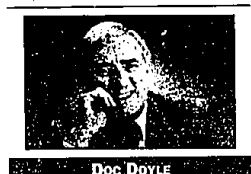
ANSWER: To set the stage, it is my belief a school superintendent has the toughest job of any job in any given community.

The superintendent is responsible from the time he/she wakes up for the safety of every child who gets on a school bus (the largest transportation system in any city); responsible for the largest lunch room in any city (let's hope no child gets ptomaine poisoning); responsible for gifted, special, college and non college bound students' education; the major caretaker of homeowners tax money, while con-

stantly under the local newspaper's microscope; and always a possible target of the teacher's union, while working up to 70 hours a week.

It is a tough job and the most singular reason why I never sought to go beyond the assistant superintendent for instruction level. Indeed, the one time I was approached by a superintendent head hunter organization (and had my ego inflated), I put on my running shoes and ran six miles (I was a runner at that time) just to clear my head of such insanity.

It is a tough job. I worked with seven superintendents. Three were canned (contracts not renewed); one took a job in Washington (his time was up); one was reassigned to an embarrassing non-entity position (school farm director); another moved on to other challenges; one - a warm, kind man - died right after teacher negotiations went into effect in 1965 (and I know



DOC DOYLE

grievances, arbitrations and contracts did him in); one, a survivor, is still a superintendent in the metropolitan Detroit suburban area.

You ask what qualities does a community look for in a new superintendent. The canned answer is they are looking for an educational and instructional leader. But there is more to the story. Let's look primarily at superintendents hired from outside the dis-

trict. Most internally hired superintendents are well known commodities. Often, a new superintendent, hired from outside the district, is a contrast to the departing superintendent. Say the departing superintendent was outstanding at public relations and did an excellent PR job with the teachers and community for years.

Typically the above district, suffering from financial problems, will now go looking for a candidate with a strong business/financial record.

Many building administrators are highly respected by their parents, and many of these parents know board members personally. Indeed, there are administrators in some districts so powerful that they could get a superintendent fired. I've seen it happen.

My 30-plus years of experience tell me that the superintendents I've known are a unique breed. Most are extremely bright, have tremendous ener-

gy, are able to "juggle 10 problems at one time," a most resilient species, one who took the job for a challenge and not just the money.

Indeed, some superintendents I know, if they had entered the business or the industrial world rather than education, would now be in major corporate positions making five times what education pays.

There are many superintendents who are winners and a few who should have "chickened out" like I did. But my daddy didn't raise any dummies. I knew I had too sensitive a nature for the position.

James "Doc" Doyle, a former teacher/school administrator/university instructor, is president of Doyle and Associates, an educational consulting firm.

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