

POINTS OF VIEW

A is for. . .

Proposal A, plus triplets, spells out very good year

When we have something to announce, Tim, you'll be the first to know," Gov. John Engler told me a couple of years ago. I didn't expect he would keep the promise, and he didn't. Mark Hornbeck of The Detroit News was first to stumble across the rumor last week that Michelle was pregnant with triplets.

My conversation with Engler occurred during an interview in which we concentrated mainly on school finance, the biggest single news topic in our circulation area.

I recalled that Engler announced his engagement to Michelle only after the 1990 election and that some of my brothers and sisters in the media were miffed because they didn't even know Engler had a steady girlfriend. "You never asked me," Engler told the news conference.

That was why I resolved to ask Engler about the prospects of children.

Although I think it's distasteful to ask people if they're expecting, I overcame that aversion and asked Engler, at the end of the interview, if there were any news on the family front he wanted to reveal.

"Huh?" he asked, not grasping what I meant.

Sharon Condon, a Northville Record reporter who was with me, asked bluntly, "He wants to know if Michelle is pregnant yet."

That's when Engler promised I would be the first to know.

I asked the governor once a year after that but gave up, out of consideration for his feelings. I figured that if I missed the big story — tough.

Well, Hornbeck got a tip last week and called Agnes Engler, the governor's mother, who blurted out enough to ver-



TIM RICHARD

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ify the tip. Engler reportedly was upset with Hornbeck. Michelle had miscarried a couple of times, so the governor was touchy, and I could see why.

But Hornbeck had been forthright and fair, identifying himself and his paper to Grandma Engler. Hornbeck's conscience should be clear. The point today, however, is not who got the big, big, big news first but what are we going to name the offspring?

Getting Proposal A passed and begetting triplets are two of the biggest things any Michigan governor has done in 157 years. Moreover, John Engler did both in the same year. Moreover yet, they both occurred about the same time, March 15.

My humble suggestion is that all three Englerites be given names with the initial A — as in Proposal A. Suppose they're girls. The Englers

are big on family names, so they might want to name one after his mother, though Agnes isn't a popular name anymore. There could be Alice, Amy, Abigail (for the outspoken wife of President John Adams), Ann, Annette, Angeline or Amelia. Don't forget the Sleeping Beauty — Aurora. And so on. For boys there is a glut of Celtic names beginning with A—. There's the fisherman saint, Andrew. And dozens more.

Bearing triplets would be tough for any healthy woman, and Michelle Engler is going on 37. At this point, I will drop the intrusion and offer her a non-partisan, non-denominational, heavy-duty prayer.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. You can reach him by Touch-Tone phone at (313) 853-2047, mailbox 1881.

What happens in S'fld sends a message to us all

Hear them cry. The Southfield community is fighting for its life.

Take note: Your community could have a similar battle when your post-Proposal A millage election rolls around.

Dozens of letters have come in to the Southfield newspaper in the weeks ahead of Monday's second millage election — all but a very few pleading with voters to understand that good schools are the heart of their community.

That's very different from the tone of letters we received ahead of the first Southfield millage election in April.

Coming on the heels of the passage of Proposal A, most of those were defiant. And most seemed to come from people who no longer had children in the schools.

Proposal A was supposed to reduce their property taxes to a shadow

of their former cost. Now, they were being asked to pay both a higher sales tax and to reinstate a major portion of that property tax.

Since that time the Southfield school board, after some prodding, reduced its tax request by a couple of mills and its duration by 15 years.

This new batch of letters pleads to retain a community. This time, the letters come from both old and new, young and mature residents.

There's newcomer Sondra Willabee, who moved to Southfield from Chelsea three years ago. "Many of our friends felt we were moving in the wrong direction," she says. "But we chose Southfield over Farmington Hills and Plymouth and Royal Oak because we wanted to live in a diverse community with strong schools. We wanted our children to learn how to be citizens of the world."

"But now, what we moved here for is being threatened. . . . Then there's longtime resident Betty J. Green whose three children graduated from Southfield high schools. She challenges her fellow older residents to "rise to the occasion. . . . Your children may be grown and out of the district, but they were not educated on your taxes alone. It took and it will still take



JUDITH DONER BERNE

the entire community's strength to educate our children."

Know this. Although Proposal A passed resoundingly in most of our communities, it just slipped by in Southfield.

Residents there were not fooled. Although they know it was a step toward greater educational equity statewide, it would be a tough go in their own community.

And they're upset.

Yes, it's true. Southfield schools has hired a public relations firm, Casey Communications Management, at a fee of up to \$43,000 to help circulate information and stir up support for the millage — in fact walking on the edge of the decree against using tax dollars to support a tax question.

But no PR firm could mobilize this kind of support. The letters are written on word processors, by hand and a few

on the old-fashioned typewriter. They come in by mail and fax and one was even handed to the Southfield newspaper editor on the streets of Birmingham.

Southfield is both a stronger and more fragile community than some. But, as in all of our communities, its young people deserve to be educated.

As Caren and Marc Feldman, M.D. writes: "Most of you who no longer have children in school once depended on the support of your local community to provide your own children with the advantages of a quality education. We who come after you seek the same opportunity."

All of us are closely watching what happens Monday in Southfield. Our turns will come.

Judith Doner Berne is managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. You can reach her at 901-2563.

MEA must replace scare tactics with solutions

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that Michigan's system of public education is facing a crisis.

Most parents, teachers, employers, administrators — even the kids in school! — share a strong desire to have world-class schools able to prepare all students to compete successfully in a global economy. And most also agree that our schools, by most measures, are failing to reach this standard.

This contradiction between hope and reality has opened the door to a wholesale assault on our public schools at just the time when public education needs all the help it can get.

Item: Most of the heat in the debate over Proposal A was generated by a bitter conflict between Gov. John Engler and the Michigan Education Association, the teachers union. The governor in effect accused the union of causing the deterioration of our schools, while the MEA charged Engler with scapegoating, not to mention being anti-union. The conflict is now the main driving force in Michigan politics.

Item: At the heart of this animosity is a law passed last December authorizing new charter schools outside the regular public school system and without MEA-represented teachers. Financed by the same per-pupil support provided to other schools, charter schools are supposed to allow experimentation free of the clumsy rules and ossified bureaucracies of the public school system. The MEA calls charter schools union-busting, plain and simple.

Item: Organizers of the Noah Webster Academy — a charter school — propose to link home schools across the state to a core of supporting teachers in Ionia County. Supported by \$5,600 per-pupil state funding, the academy will offer back-to-basics lessons stressing traditional values. "This is a school that will be using public tax dollars to sanction a certain type of morality," says Kim Brennan Root of the MEA.

Item: The Pinckney school board is virtually certain to turn over management of its schools to Education Alternatives Inc., a for-profit firm that asserts privatized schools can improve educational performance at reduced per-pupil cost. A lot of people are pretty skeptical of EAI's track record, but even more are so frustrated that they're willing to take a chance on privatization.



PHILIP POWER

tonishing letter from David Sabedra, MEA regional director, to Eric Gilbertson, president of Saginaw Valley State University, which:

- Threatened to refuse student teachers from SVSU if the university authorizes charter schools that don't meet MEA standards.
- Urged local school superintendents and boards of education to end their involvement with Saginaw Valley programs.
- Suggested MEA members who are Saginaw Valley graduates quit donating money to the university.

Now I know and admire a lot of teachers who are MEA members, including those who teach my son, now in sixth grade in the public schools. And I know and admire a lot of leadership people in the MEA.

But the stonewall tactics the union is now using expose it to the terrible risk of being considered largely irrelevant in resolving the overall public policy issue of what happens to K-12 education in this state.

There's an old slogan that goes: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." It's axiomatic that teachers in this state — the majority of whom are currently MEA members — must become part of any solution to the problem of how our kids can learn at a world-class level. For that to happen, the MEA needs to do more thinking about educational solutions and less writing of inflammatory and threatening letters.

Philip Power is the chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. You can reach him by Touch-Tone phone at (313) 853-2047, mailbox 1881.

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