

POINTS OF VIEW

County voters think, then do the right thing

Twice this month we Oakland County voters have shown the right stuff.

We also have shown we think for ourselves.

Last week we OK'd added millage for Oakland Community College — 35 mills for seven years. That will cost the owner of a \$200,000 home about \$80 more annually and allow this largest community college in Michigan to renovate buildings and add programs and technology.

The week before, voters in 20 communities closest to the Detroit metro area approved a third of a mill for three years to expand and improve the SMART transit system. That will cost that same \$200,000 homeowner about \$33 annually.

But lest you think we're pushovers, recall that this was OCC's second try for millage.

And that the Republican-dominated Oakland County Board of Commissioners lobbied all of our communities hard in an attempt to derail the system.

OCC: "We didn't do a good enough job of educating our voters the first time," said Patsy Calkins, chancellor of the 30,000-student college, following the successful June 12 vote.

I'd modify that.

I'd say that voters educated college officials as to what they'd go for by defeating in March an added one-mill-for-ever request.

Then, to their credit, school officials applied the 3Rs.

They read what voters told them.

They re-did the arithmetic to ask for a little less millage.

They wrote another millage proposal for a specific, and reasonable, number of years.



JUDITH DONER BERNE

Then, yes, they more fully mobilized their resources — students, faculty, alumni, friends of OCC — to write and call their friends, neighbors, friends of friends and neighbors of neighbors to get out that yes vote.

And it certainly couldn't have hurt, that in the wee days before that successful second attempt, U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich and undersecretary Doug Ross made an hour's stop

at OCC's Southfield campus. Ross, of course, is a former state senator from Southfield.

There Reich said, "Community colleges are the lynchpins in a new era of workforce and OCC is the model."

We passed the millage by a 57 percent favorable vote.

SMART: Unfortunately, this victory wasn't quite so clean cut although an even greater majority, 72 percent, voted in favor.

That's because, prodded by Republican county commissioners out to scuttle SMART, officials in 41 of Oakland's 61 communities denied bus service to their residents and businesses by not allowing them to vote on funding the issue. On a broader basis, they denied metropolitan Detroit a real public transit system.

Now, for example, SMART busses still roll down Orchard Lake Road in

West Bloomfield between Farmington Hills and Pontiac and along Woodward Avenue in Bloomfield Hills between Birmingham and Pontiac. But they don't stop.

And now, to retrieve bus service or to install it our growing, more outlying areas, it appears that each affected community will have to put the issue on a local ballot.

Whole township boards and all Oakland County commissioners are up for election in fall, 1996. Most city councils stagger their election terms.

Oakland County voters have the right stuff and think for themselves. I trust we also have good memories.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of this newspaper. You can leave her a message from a touch-tone phone at 1-313-953-2047, mailbox 1997.

Court reform emerges as consolidation attempt

The cat's out of the bag. The game's afoot! Play ball!

Court reform, a long festering problem, is emerging in Michigan as a major issue, in the same ballpark with Wayne County reform in 1980 and school finance reform in 1993-1994.

Let's define "court reform." It's a simplified structure — perhaps even a single trial court instead of circuit, recorder's, probate and district courts. It's the same revenue base for everyone — not state-paid courts in Detroit and locally-funded courts in the other 82 counties. It's administrative simplification.

Let's pull together what look like discrete events:

■ State Rep. Deborah Whyman, R-Canton, finally uncoiled her commonsense bill to consolidate Wayne Circuit and Detroit Recorder's courts. The system is crazy, and always was. Every-

where else in Michigan, circuit courts handle felony cases and major civil cases. In Wayne County, circuit court handles major civil cases, and 29 Detroit Recorder's judges, augmented by a handful (five) of circuit judges, handle felony cases.

To put it another way, Detroiters elect their judges and have half the votes to elect countywide judges. What's theirs is theirs, and half of ours is theirs. Naturally, the racists in Detroit squawked that "they" are taking away Detroit's power. Bull.

■ State Sen. Robert Geake, R-Northville, and a bipartisan crew of friends formally presented their plan to take Friend of the Court, which handles payments in our growing crop of divorce cases, away from the circuit judges and put it under general county government.

FOC is an administrative operation



TIM RICHARD

that doesn't belong under judges, who should be busy with judicial work. For some strange reason, circuit judges are the most pompous egomaniacs (look at the Oakland bench's annual report some time, with its fawning praise of every judge's every action) and don't want reform. But the fact is that aggrieved men and women can't take

their mounds of grievances with FOC to anyone. The Geake Team's plan makes sense.

■ Atty. Gen. Frank Kelley gave the Geake plan backhanded support when he ruled that FOC chiefs are "employees" and "officers" of the court. That removes an imagined constitutional barrier to a reform.

■ After 12 years on the Supreme Court, James Brickley is chief justice. Brickley thinks in dynamic rather than static terms. He studies major structural problems instead of tinkering around the edges with sandpaper. As lieutenant governor, Brickley was Gov. Bill Milliken's hammer in launching a charter chief executive in Wayne County. Brickley was active on school finance reform before most politicians.

As chief justice, Brickley holds a lot of levers. The Supreme Court's task force has recommended a single trial

court as one option in reform. Brickley can be expected to push that option. He also will push the task force's recommendations for more centralized administration of courts and full state funding of trial courts.

The chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee also hinted, if I heard him correctly, that the money for full state funding of courts could come from what is now revenue sharing.

The game's afoot! In bits and pieces, the debate over trial court reform has started.

■ Gov. John Engler last year made wise use of his veto power by threatening to block more judges for Oakland, western Wayne and Washtenaw counties until judicial operations are reformed.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

Wait for employer-driven result of charter schools

Ofall the arguments now taking place in Michigan, it is the debate about school reform that will have the most profound impact on the lives of most people.

It's plain that the K-12 school system is not producing graduates with the skills required to compete in a global economy, much less meet the current needs of employers. That's not in doubt. What is at issue is how to go about it.

The hard-right ideological majority on the state Board of Education is talking about selling "shares" in the public schools, evidently reasoning that the way to get "businesslike results" is to treat schools as though they were corporations.

The teachers unions like the Michigan Education Association sound as though there is nothing wrong with the schools that lots and lots of money couldn't cure, while at the same time spreading tales of gloom and doom that Gov. John Engler and his allies are out to destroy the public schools.

The moderates keep pointing to the school reform efforts already under way through things like diploma certification by the state and the MEAP tests now used throughout Michigan to measure what kids actually learn, year by year, building by building.

The debate has been marked so far by an enormous amount of hot air and relatively few facts. The time, however, is coming when results are going to count for a whole lot. I'd have to say that on first blush, it's employer-driven changes working through charter schools that have the best chance for success.

Here's an example: The Livingston Technical Academy, a charter school designed to provide an initial class of 100 students with the skills that are needed by the area's growing list of relatively high tech manufacturers like Ogihara America, in Howell.

The LTA is based on the good groundwork done by the Livingston Applied Technology Education Consortium, which over the past 10 years has provided vocational education to some 2,800 kids from all five of Livingston County's high schools.

But as time went on, the area manufacturers kept needing more and more technology and the pool of school-leavers kept dwindling. "We need candidates with more technically sound fundamental skills," according to Tom Olat, vice president at Bradhart Products in Howell and chairman of the Howell Area Chamber of Commerce's Manufacturer's Network.

With the need clear, the passage of Proposal A last year authorized creating charter schools and opened the way to action. Earlier this spring, the Livingston Technical Academy had its charter approved by Central Michigan Uni-



PHILIP POWER

■ The LTA is based on the good groundwork done by the Livingston Applied Technology Consortium, which over the past 10 years has provided vocational education to some 2,800 kids from all five of Livingston County's high schools.

versity and collected a total of \$65,000 in grants. It's now trying to pick a site, select a president and enroll its first class starting this fall.

What's remarkable about the LTA is its focus: Less on what goes on in its own classroom and more on the equipment, technology and skilled master craftsmen on the shop floor of local employers. "We consider the classroom to be our various businesses where students will learn by doing," says Tom Erhart, chairman of the LTA.

That makes sense. I remember taking shop way back when I was in high school. The equipment and tools we used then might, just barely, have made it into Henry Ford's first assembly line at the beginning of the century. There's no substitute for the actual tools and high tech equipment being used in industry as the classroom for tomorrow's employees.

I'm optimistic about LTA's prospects. The group running the show seems to have a more results-oriented focus than all the ideologues now running around the school debate. And I've always felt that the key to school reform was arranging things so market forces — i.e., the real needs of employers for new hires with skills — could be brought to bear.

Let's see what they've accomplished in a year. (For more information on the Livingston Technical Academy, call (810) 227-5609.)

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