

Profit on ice?

Remember consultant's advice

For those of us who think that governors should actually do for the governed the city of Farmington Hills proudly presents (cue the fanfare!) the Farmington Hills Ice Arena. No fancy-schmancy name here. It's not The Igloo, or The Ice House, or The Good Skate. No, nothing so clever or pretentious as that. It's simply the Farmington Hills Ice Arena, if you please, and it's open for business at Founders Sports Park down on Eight Mile Road.

Well, let's hope they put their creative efforts into the design, construction and management of the municipal ice arena, not its name.

Hills voters in August 1994 said yes to the bond issue that provided about \$6 million for an arena with multiple surfaces. Hopefully, the bond debt will be retired through revenue generated through arena operations.

Now, the Observer has always favored an ice arena in the Farmington area — as long as it's a first-class one and some plan can be devised to make it pay.

We've taken an early look, and the city seems to be making good on the former point. Sure, there are a few (dozen) details to get squared away, but that's the case with most new construction. Overall the rink's looking great, we think.

The old Zamboni's going to have to make a few hundred trips over the ice surfaces before that question of profitability is settled, though. Toward an in-the-black balance sheet, we

hereby reiterate some of what was considered good advice from a consultant when the idea of an ice arena was first proposed more than two years ago. The expert said:

■ It takes more than just ice to make a good arena. It takes the amenities (restaurants, lounges, pro shops, other stores) and a comfortable setting to keep the customers coming back.

■ A rink should be user- and spectator-friendly. If the rink is (or turns into) a metal hulk, freezing cold inside with uncomfortable seats, filthy restrooms and no place to buy a cup of coffee or a bag of peanuts, forget it. The customers will. If this rink is run right, though, it could become a mecca for winter sports enthusiasts from all over the Midwest. It might even become a tourist attraction in its own right. Dollars would be brought into the community's economy.

There is a demand for recreation on ice, we think. If other area arenas are experiencing hard times financially, it isn't for lack of skaters. Ice users have to be shoehorned in at midnight and at 4 a.m. and 5 a.m.

So, we're happy there's an ice arena, and we're happy there's a Founders Sports Park to put it in. Founders Sports Park that's the old Sod Farm the city purchased for recreation purposes a few years ago. Now there's another excellent example of the governors doing for the governed.

New stadium plan has merit

There's much merit in the latest, sealed-down plan for a new Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Owner Mike Ilitch would be responsible for building a new \$200 million major league baseball park. Government's role would be confined to \$60 million for roads and infrastructure — no big general fund commitment.

We don't share the widespread notion that government, at either the local or state level, must be a major partner in a baseball stadium.

Baseball is show biz. It is privately owned. Players' salaries are privately negotiated. Government has no role in subsidizing such enterprises by being a stadium partner.

Gov. John Engler grasps that fact of life; he apparently has read the polls. In the House of Representatives, the Republican caucus is rebelling at the prospect of any state money going into a Detroit stadium in any way. There's a bitter Grand Rapids vs. Detroit rivalry in the State Capitol; the Senate even has a task force to sort out who's getting the most pork.

The governor, however, has a handful of ace cards. One is that road funds can be committed by the State Transportation Commission, which the governor appoints; the Legislature tried and failed to tie the STC's hands.

Other aces are the Michigan Strategic Fund, "renaissance zone" laws, cleanup funds and the like. Engler may be right when he says he won't have to deal with the Legislature.

Engler's proposal views the Detroit Baseball Co. as a big business project and appears to treat it accordingly. The state widens roads, improves drains, adds freeway ramps, installs traffic signals and gives tax breaks for industrial plants. Why not for show biz?

Detroit wants the stadium, and most suburbs don't. Detroit has been the home of a major league team since the 1870s, when the baseball club was named for a locally raised Civil War unit. The world wouldn't collapse if the team left town, but most folks here are Tiger fans and want the team to stay in Detroit.

Without question, Ilitch's building a new stadium near downtown would hurt neighborhood businesses near the old stadium at Michigan Avenue and Trumbull. Landowners, including a church, run parking lots. Souvenir stands and bars pick up business. Ilitch's strategy is that his club must have a monopoly on parking, food and everything in order for the club to generate enough revenue to survive.

As the Engler administration prepares to help Ilitch's business, we would offer these cautionary suggestions:

■ Require adequate restroom stalls. Businesses don't make a profit on toilets, and they will try to cut corners. The current aging and rickety stadium is particularly deficient in such facilities.

■ Require the new stadium to be accessible to the handicapped and fully comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act.

■ Require plenty of conveniently placed water fountains. Ball games last an hour longer today than when Ilitch was a kid. We can cite horrible examples of new Grapefruit League stadiums in Florida where water fountains are hidden or inoperable and where pop sells for \$2.50. We shouldn't allow the Tigers to get away with that.

■ Keep a sharp eye on parking rates. Monopolies gouge consumers whenever they can.

Under such circumstances, a new Tiger Stadium could help baseball survive in southeastern Michigan.



LETTERS

'A fine system'

Tuesday, I left my office late in the morning to celebrate the first day of the 1995-96 school year with my two children.

As the bus pulled to a stop and they jumped aboard, greeted their on-time driver and renewed old acquaintances, I was struck by just how fortunate they are to be enjoying and excelling in the Farmington Public School System, specifically Hillside Elementary.

I returned to my office with a profound sense of satisfaction that every parent strives for, that being providing a better opportunity for one's children than we were provided for as children.

Imagine my surprise when later that day I had the occasion to peruse your headline and subsequent story, "Parents Choose New School Path."

How do four disenchanted parents out of an assumed population of 5,000 or more rate page one headlines? Before we walk too far down the road toward alleged declining academic standards, the question of their perspective begs to be asked.

Originally raised and educated in suburban Detroit, my wife and I have lived in half the states between California and the Carolinas. I've made the investments in private schools that many parents contemplate.

Upon moving here we contemplated a similar investment. We chose Hillside instead because of the overwhelmingly positive environment for learning. Parents are encouraged to participate and complement their child's education.

I'm compelled to ask the question to those parents so disenchanted — Is your defection to private schools or home learning part of the solution or perhaps symptomatic of the problem? If you don't believe it's part of the problem, take a good look at your children when all the neighborhood gets off that public bus that they aren't on.

Do better than look. Ask them, really ask them, how they feel. I don't think you'll hear them say they feel gifted or smarter. And, by the way, if your children are really forthright with you, that pain you'll feel in your chest that ends up welling in the corners of your eyes is the price you are paying for mortgaging your children's social development, all the while searching for an education that you'll never objectively be able to determine whether it was worth the price.

Coast to coast to coast, we enjoy one of the finest school systems anywhere. Let's encourage parents to collectively, objectively and cooperatively keep striving to make it even better. A first step in that direction might include printing the perspective from one of the 5,000 or more satisfied parents.

J. Bruce Lange, Farmington Hills

Bad attitude

In reading your story of Aug. 28, "Parents Choose New School Path," I was appalled at Superintendent Maxfield's attitude toward gifted and talented children.

I would like to let these parents know that they are not alone in their struggle. I have known of other parents at Wooddale who have felt the same way and have left under similar circumstances.

The sizable enrollment of former Farmington gifted students at the Reeper School for the gifted in Bloomfield Hills is additional proof how desperate parents are to escape philosophies and policies they know are not meeting the needs of their children.

Maxfield's line "equity is challenging every kid" is ridiculous. How does neglecting gifted children challenge anyone? To deny a gifted child who is functioning two or three grade levels ahead of the rest is to smother that child's true potential.

For the Farmington School District to be doing this on such a large scale is not only unjust, it's exclusionary to these children from the whole educational process.

Why shouldn't parents be angry when they see the school district misappropriating Sec. 57 state aid money from gifted programs and funneling them into general enrichment? If this is what inclusion is all about, then wake up, you special education parents, your state aid funding may be next.

The system is misdirected and needs to be fixed. If Mr. Maxfield was really serious about "challenging all kids," he'd make the AP classes the standard for all students.

What we have today in Farmington is the "popular school" of the average majority. The majority accepts the average curriculum; anything better than average is considered an elitist threat.

The Farmington District for years has loaded students' time up with lots of after schools sports and very little homework. Farmington's grading and assessments are so generalized they do not alert parents, students or the public to some very real needs in our schools. This is what concerns the parents of the gifted children who are now leaving in disgust.

Sure, 96.7 percent of Farmington's students graduate, but what are the standards? These parents have a right to be angry at the average values Maxfield and the School Board are instilling in all our children, and their demoralizing influence.

Eric Borregard, Farmington Hills

COMMUNITY VOICE

QUESTION:
Are you sorry to see summer end?



"Yes, I love sunshine and warm weather."
Rosemarie Denton
Novi



"Yes. It seems to go by so fast. I must be getting old."
Sharon Staback
Novi



"Summer went too fast. We didn't get to do half the things we wanted to do."
Judy Gless
Farmington



"Yes, I'm nervous about going back to school."
Amanda Glass
Farmington

We asked this question at the Downtown Branch of the Farmington Community Library.

The Farmington Observer

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— Philip Power