

Break time

This abatement makes sense

Sometimes you've got to give a little to get a little. And we're swayed that Farmington Hills needs to break with its stated policy and give a tax break to Bosch Corp. to get the firm to keep its high-tech brake systems manufacturing plant here.

Yes, several months ago this newspaper agreed with the principled stand against tax abatements as a form of corporate welfare. We also agreed that it wasn't fair to the rest of our taxpayers to allow some corporations to forgo paying part of their taxes.

That situation was different, involving a firm asking city approval for a move-out permit to get a tax abatement in Plymouth Township, where it was relocating. The city would have received nothing for approving that tax break except to continue the idea of corporate gypsies moving from one successful town to another just to get a tax cut.

This time, Bosch says it's facing two options — to stay in Farmington Hills or to move to Indiana, where costs for energy, construction and taxes are lower. A state program called Michigan Economic Growth Authority is willing to give Bosch up to \$40 million in tax credits to level out the economic playing field between the cost of doing business in Michigan and the cost of other states.

The linchpin, though, is Farmington Hills' participation, since the MEGA plan requires the benefiting city to foot part of the bill.

The cost of doing business being the same, Bosch officials have said they're willing to stay. That means keeping its 700 jobs at its facility and expanding another 210 to 300 more jobs at its new plant.

So the bottom line rests with the Farmington Hills city council, which has traditionally opposed tax abatements. Two tax abatements have been granted in the city, both in 1981 and both firms kept a Farmington Hills address after their abatement expired.

While it is admirable for city council members to stand for principles, there are political realities that cannot be ignored

While it is admirable for city council members to stand for principles, there are political realities that cannot be ignored. This MEGA fund is out there, being provided to firms in other Michigan towns to create new jobs that might have otherwise moved to other states. This type of "reinvestment" by cities goes on with big corporations all over Michigan, reducing short-term tax profits for much greater long-term gains that eventually boost the area's entire economy.

The only real choice seems to be whether to work out the city's give-back as a direct tax abatement or so-called incentives, such as having the city pay for some construction costs or not charge permit fees.

The direct tax abatement violates the council's anti-abatement policy but means the city will share its \$1.5 million give-back with the county, schools and college taxing entities.

If it stands on principle, the city could withhold the actual "abatement" and pay the entire \$1.5 million itself by providing the incentives. The direct abatement, however, makes the most sense since all taxing agencies will benefit by the tax value increases after this new plant is built.

It is also imperative that the city set strict policy guidelines for future tax abatements, as proposed at Saturday's study session. Future abatements should be weighed against issues like whether state or federal money is involved, a minimum number of employees, length of time in the community and improvement of the tax base, among others.

This seems to be a time for principle to take a back seat to common sense.

Patchwork transit system fails

Recent cancellation of Detroit Department of Transportation bus service to suburban areas only underscores the need for a truly united regional mass transit system.

- Nowhere is the lack of cooperation between Detroit and its suburbs more apparent than with regard to mass transit — even this far into the Archer era, a so-called golden age for urban/suburban cooperation.

- Nowhere has that lack of cooperation had a more devastating economic effect.

- Many of the now-canceled suburban lines were relatively new, added one year ago to help Detroiters find jobs in the suburbs.

- They were canceled because they were unprofitable, according to D-DOT, but mass transit itself is generally unprofitable on its own. Even the most successful systems demand subsidies from government. SMART, the area's suburban line, has said it will pick up some of the slack. But SMART, subsidized on a community-by-community basis, can't cover the whole load.

- The situation shows just what a political pawn mass transportation and those who need it — employers and employees — have become in our region.

- We are left with a patchwork system. On one hand, we have a Detroit bus system that serves Detroit and a suburban system that serves most, but not all, of the communities in Wayne and Oakland counties.

Mass transit has become the province of the poor. While our area's poorest residents most definitely need access to jobs and, therefore, to transportation, unified systems in other cities have long served people of all social classes.

Our too-heavy dependence upon the automobile is already bringing dire consequences. Businesses and residents are moving ever further away from the central city. Urban sprawl eats up valuable farmland and open space, defeating the goal of seeking out peace and serenity, which lasts but a few years.

The quality of life is diminished as rush hour is extended and individual commutes to work grow longer.

A reasoned and reasonable, unified mass transit system will benefit employers and employees.

At the Sears store at Livonia Mall, about 50 employees, out of a workforce of 400, relied on D-DOT, said Jim Spilos, the store's human resources manager. Most now use SMART, but Spilos said there are five who decided the added hardship is not worth their jobs.

"Can't we really get a viable transportation system that's cost-effective for the city and the suburbs?" he said.

It's time for county leaders in Wayne, Oakland, Macomb and representatives from Mayor Dennis Archer's office along with SMART and D-DOT officials to huddle and find a solution to the mass transit problem that has plagued this region for too long.

TURNING BACK THE PAGES

This week in history as reported in past editions of the Farmington Observer and Farmington Enterprise.

40 YEARS AGO — JAN. 30, 1958 (ENTERPRISE)
A \$4.8 million bond to finance the proposed Farmington interceptor sewer was approved by the Oakland County Board of Supervisors.

The first step took place in the establishment of an elementary physical education department in the Farmington school system. School board members authorized the immediate hiring of one physical education teacher and promised to seriously consider adding three more for the 1958-59 school year.

28 YEARS AGO — JAN. 27, 1970
The final public hearing on the proposed charter for the City of Farmington Hills was

scheduled for Jan. 31. Its purpose was to test public sentiment concerning the May 8 election.

Farmington Township Police were investigating the cause of the township's first traffic fatality of the year. A Southfield man was killed in a two-car accident in the 31000 block of W. 12 Mile Road.

2 YEARS AGO — JAN. 29, 1996
The Farmington Hills City Council voted unanimously to buy property on the northeast corner of Rockwell and Grand River to help beautify the area.

An Oakland County Circuit Judge granted an attorney's request for a Farmington Hills man to undergo a psychiatric examination to find out if he was competent to stand trial for the abduction and rape of his former girlfriend.

COMMUNITY VOICE

QUESTION:

Do you think the media are out of control?



"Yes, I do. They can take anyone innocent or guilty and do anything they want. And I don't like getting election results before they close the polls in California."
Dolores Shepherd
Farmington



"...George Bernard Shaw (said): 'Power does not corrupt. But fools if they attain power corrupt power.' You always have to be careful and courteous... You never really know who you're dealing with."
Scott Lenheiser
Farmington Hills



"Yes, I think they're working Clinton over and he deserves every nickel of it."
Ted Pidgeon
Farmington



"Yes, they keep writing the same things over and over and they won't drop it."
Christina Clark
Farmington Hills

We asked this question at the Farmington Community Library.

LETTERS

Unfair view of special ed

We are writing to express our strong objections to some of the characterizations of special education contained in the editorial which appeared in the Jan. 1, 1998, edition of the Farmington Observer. We recognize that this particular editorial was not written in the Farmington office, but was written elsewhere for publication in all of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. However, publication in the Farmington Observer conveys the mistaken impression that the Farmington Observer is not sensitive to the needs of special education students and their families.

Specifically, we are troubled by the use of the word cancerous in describing the growth of special education programs. As an adjective, cancerous means "an evil that spreads destructively." We strongly object to the notion that special education is in some way evil and that its growth is destructive. The many reasons for enrollment increases in special education programs include improved diagnostic and screening techniques and early identification of children at risk.

Another concern involves the suggestion that parents are able to place their children in special education programs without supporting evidence. In fact, prior to special education certification, students must undergo a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation that demonstrates significant deficit areas. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that a parent would voluntarily seek to identify their child as being disabled or handicapped when no such problem exists.

As established in the Michigan Supreme Court's ruling in the Durant case, the State of Michigan has been negligent in meeting its constitutional requirement to provide its fair share of special education funding. Unfortunately, the Legislature and governor did not provide adequate assurance of future funding of special education programs in the bills which were passed following the Court's ruling. This, combined with the growing number of children who legitimately require special education service, presents a crisis which the entire state must address. Unfortunately, the Jan. 1 editorial could serve to polarize parents and other interested citizens.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize that this editorial, inaccurate and unfair as it was, was not typical of the Farmington Observer's ongoing efforts to present an accurate picture of Farmington's educational programs. In fact, the Observer has done an excellent job keeping the community informed of the wide range of programs that Farmington Schools provide for all of its students, regardless of ability. We certainly hope that this continues and that unfair portrayals, such as that concerning special education, not occur in the future.

C. Robert Maxfield
superintendent

Farmington Public Schools

Janice Richards
director of special education
Farmington Public Schools

Trips can be eye-openers

I wanted to personally thank you for allowing me the opportunity to educate my children. You see, we visited Washington, D.C., just after Christmas for the second year in a row. We thought it was appropriate to introduce our Midwestern 10-year-old and 7-year-old to the concept of government. Last year, we toured the White House, Congress, and the Supreme Court. We explained the basic concept of separation of powers, the grand design of the Constitution, and the political decision-making process. Being intuitive they of course asked why people were saying "The White House was for sale"; so we also had to explain the concept of fund-raising, and the giving of contributions large enough to justify spending a night in the White House. They're young but I think they got it. Thank you for that first lesson.

This year, we again visited Washington, and once more were able to share with them the intricacies of the federal government. Being more sophisticated this year, they began to ask tougher questions about character, integrity and lying. You once again exceeded our expectations with the recent disclosure of "inter-office" affairs and witness tampering. I now get to explain to their young minds the difference between oral sex and other sex; the fine difference between an improper relationship and an affair, and what it means to influence a witness giving a deposition under oath. I'm sure these are all issues they can comprehend.

So again, thank you for allowing me to educate my children in the workings of presidential politics. I can't wait until we visit next year. By then, they'll be asking what "impeachable offenses" are; why the president had to resign, and why we have a President Gore that nobly voted for. Oh, so much to be thankful for.

Jerry Mulligan
Farmington Hills

Opinions are to be shared: We welcome your ideas, as do your neighbors. That's why we offer this space on a weekly basis for opinions in your own words. We will help by editing for clarity. To assure authenticity, we ask that you sign your letter and provide a contact telephone number.

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— Philip Power