

## POINTS OF VIEW

## Sprawl and deterioration of downtowns will dominate headlines

**H**eadlines like these are increasingly appearing in this newspaper:

- Local citizens group fights strip mall development
- 400-acre centennial farm slated for subdivision
- County road congestion makes commuting tough
- Michigan to lose millions of acres of farmland
- Citizens group charged with NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) thinking
- Another store closes; downtown called "a wasteland"

Lurking behind each of these stories are interconnected matters of development, zoning, land use planning and environmental preservation. Put them all together and what you get is something called "sprawl."

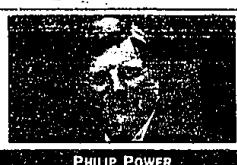
The Michigan Society of Planning Officials has produced a pretty good definition of sprawl: "a low density pattern of development ... (that is)

automobile dependent, energy and land consumptive, and requires a very high ratio of road surface to development served."

Sprawl is the most common form of growth in Michigan today. And I'm pretty sure the number and intensity of local conflicts that trace their origin back to sprawl are only going to increase as time goes on. Here's why.

Assuming the economy stays reasonably healthy, Michigan's 9.2 million population is expected to grow by 1.1 million people by 2020. If development continues at the current low density levels, those 1.1 people will urbanize as much land as was urbanized by the first 9.2 million, consuming nearly 2 million acres of rural land. That's space equivalent to four or five counties!

Because sprawl affects the lives of nearly everybody who reads this newspaper, I invited Lana Pollack, president of the Michigan Environmental Council, and two of her col-



PHILIP POWER

leagues to meet with our editorial board last week. Pollack served as a state senator for 12 years before starting her own statewide newspaper, Michigan Monthly. Casting around for something constructive to do after selling the paper, Pollack signed on with MEC, a coalition of 53 organizations organized 20 years ago to provide a voice for the environment in Lansing.

One clear conclusion: One of the biggest contributors to sprawl is wrongheaded public policy. Take the Plat Act and its successors, for exam-

ple. In seeking to provide rural land owners relief from going through all the regulatory and legal aggravations of plating their land preparatory to sale, the legislature enacted laws that allowed property to be divided up into parcels of 10 acres or more for sale without being formally platted.

The net result? Lots and lots of 10-acre lots sold. And as the saying goes, 10 acres is "too small to farm and too large to mow." Building one single family home on a 10-acre lot is a great way to convert a lot of formerly rural land into exurban subdivisions.

Another topic: The overwhelming preference of folks in Michigan is to live on a large lot in a rural setting. That's low density development and that contributes to sprawl.

Well designed developments - by clustering homes close together and preserving common ground as open space, for example - can provide people with a home in a rural setting, often at less cost to developers and

their customers than traditional design. In fact, Pollack says her organization isn't anti-growth. Instead, MEC favors "smart growth," which includes well designed cluster housing and downtown redevelopment.

I pricked my ears up at "downtown redevelopment," as it's always seemed to me that the deterioration of traditional downtowns is one of the inevitable consequences of sprawl. developments such as strip shopping centers and big box stores built on previously productive farmland.

You'll be seeing sprawl and what to do about it as an important part of this newspaper's coverage in weeks to come.

*Philip Power is chairman of Home-Town Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net*

## MEAP: Believe it, as a parent or guardian, you can exempt your children

It's that time of year again when the Farmington Public School District pumps and primes its fourth, fifth, seventh and eighth graders for the Michigan Educational Assessment Program Test (the jury's still out on the high school MEAP test - which it well should be). MEAP is a test purported by the district as a necessary means of evaluating how students in the Farmington Public Schools measure up to the state standards. State standards are a difficult "standard" to compare to because the MEAP test is not a "standard" test. It is prone to changes quite frequently, so it is not always possible to compare results in a single district from year to year.

When results are down from one year to the next, the Farmington district has reasons to account for the downturn. For example, "There was a greater influx of new students from other districts who don't do as well as students who have been in the Farmington district for a couple of years."

Another common response is "The test was new this year and we have to 'align our curriculum with the objectives of the state,'" as stated by Kris Gekiere, the district's test coordina-

tor, in the Jan. 16 Farmington Observer, in regard to the low test scores at the three high schools on the new MEAP social studies section.

Another, less-publicized reason the test is flawed is that sometimes a question on the test has a possibility of two answers. A few years ago, Big Boy restaurants was printing sample MEAP questions on the place mats. I commented to my husband about one of the questions and asked him what he thought the answer was because it seemed we could choose between two answers.

This past summer I requested information about the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship Program (HB4668) from Lansing. This bill determines the criteria for awarding merit scholarships to students taking the MEAP test.

I received a "Legislative Analysis" document. This explains a piece of legislation in detail, in lay terms and reports the reason legislators are for or against the bill. A section of the analysis discussed an amendment proposed by the House Education Committee to not include the social studies part of the high school MEAP test in determining the Merit Scholar-

## QUEST COLUMNIST



MELODY JASKE

ship award. The House Education Committee determined that segments of the test and the explicit list of Core Democratic Values of American Constitutional Democracy were "value-laden in unacceptable ways" and the test asked students "leading questions." Based on that analysis and concurrence from a teacher, I believe that the House Education Committee would find the same incidence of "leading and value-laden questions" in all levels

of MEAP testing.

Finally, I want to shout it at the top of my lungs: It is not mandatory for any student to take the MEAP test. It is only mandatory that public schools proctor the test. Any parent may go to the office of the school their child attends and sign an exemption form. A child can be exempt from part or all of the sections tested, and no reason needs to be given. It is outrageous that the district promulgates the notion that MEAP testing is required by the state.

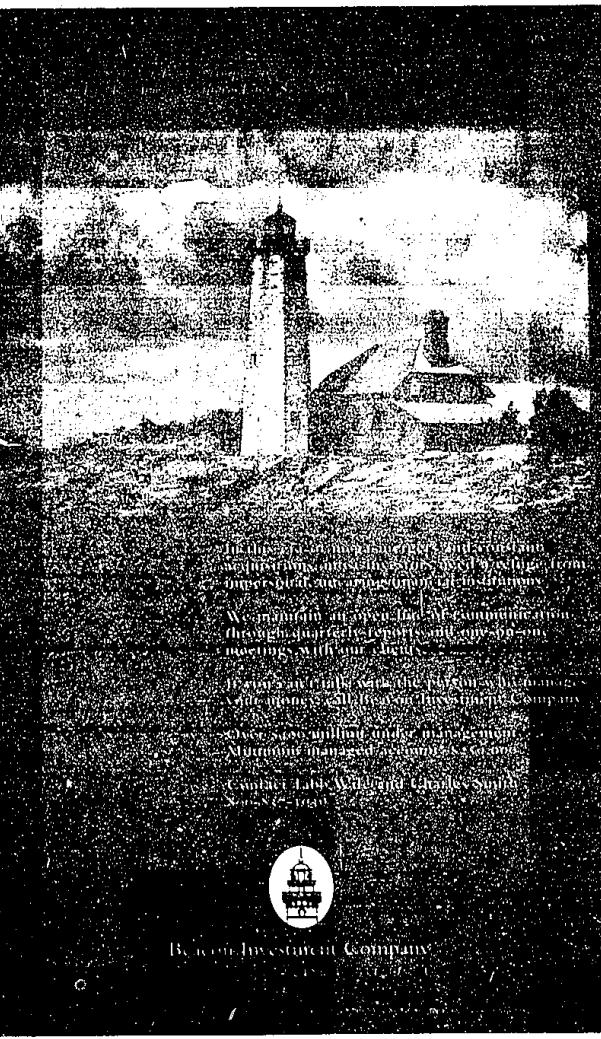
In the letter I received, the following paragraph appears: "All students are required by the state to be tested. Special testing accommodations are available, upon written request, for students with special needs. Only

parents/guardians are permitted to exempt students from being tested. If you do not want your child to be tested, you must notify your child's school and sign the exemption form." The first sentence of that paragraph obviously needs to be changed to reflect the truth.

Until the state changes the MEAP test so it is a true test of knowledge and achievement and not a measure of a values system, I urge each concerned parent to contact Lansing to make this change.

In addition, while waiting for the change, I urge you to exempt your child from any MEAP testing.

*Melody Jaske is a parent, a former school board candidate and former PTA member.*



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