

Farmington Observer

OPINION

33411 GRAND RIVER, FARMINGTON, MICHIGAN 48335

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Feeding the birds

Public education is the answer

Education will go a lot further in eradicating feeding problems with Canada geese, pigeons and sea gulls in Farmington Hills than will penalties.

Those penalties – a maximum 93 days in jail and/or a \$500 fine – will accompany an ordinance adopted by the Farmington Hills City Council Jan. 11 and that will become effective within a week.

The ordinance was prompted by complaints from residents who say they are tired of neighbors feeding and drawing large flocks of these birds. That's not to mention the messiness the birds leave behind in people's yards and on their property. Simply put, the ordinance says you cannot intentionally draw six or more geese, pigeons or sea gulls by deliberately feeding them.

Sounds simple enough. And thankfully, the ordinance is supposed to be complaint driven. That means watch out if you have a neighbor who is watching what and how often you are feeding these birds, intentionally or otherwise.

Beyond complaints from neighbors, however, it's clear that the only true way to resolve these problems is for all of us to learn about the wildlife in the area. It would be a great

help if city naturalist Joe Derek and the Special Services Department provided not only pamphlets about feeding wildlife, but also hosted educational meetings in neighborhoods, where residents say there is a great proliferation of geese, pigeons and sea gulls dining.

Before neighbors tattle and police issue violations it would do all of us well to understand why it's not wise to feed these birds, not just because of the effect on neighbors, but the effect – such as dependency on humans – on the birds themselves.

By now wildlife in Farmington Hills has to be good and confused. First of all, we wipe out their habitats with development, over development in some cases. Then we draw wildlife back by trying to recreate natural habitats with open spaces, parks and wetlands. And then once they wind their way back to us, we develop concerns about the over-proliferation of these creatures and the impact they have on neighborhoods.

Let's get our messages to the wildlife population clear. The only way to do that is by taking the time to learn. Penalties are short-term solutions. Education will last a lifetime.

Local heroes make it end well

What are the chances? The latest hero in the Farmington area said just that even after she played a key role in finding a lost shelter.

Kudos go to Farmington Public Schools bus driver Nancy Gangnier, who aided greatly in finding Nikki, a 2-year-old pet who belongs to Matthew and Brett Matusz of West Bloomfield.

The holiday disappearance of the dog could easily have been one of those sad events that "everyone" knows, yet no one does anything about.

But in this case, Darlene Matusz, mother of Matthew and Brett, was wise to cross from Our Lady of Sorrows School – where her sons attend school – to the nearby public school bus yard. There Matusz found kindred spirits and employees who certainly are community minded.

Among those who helped and should be

praised are drivers and dispatchers Darlene Vaccaro, Chris Corrie, Linda Harris, Cherie Harper, Cathy Ashmead, Sharon James and Debra Carver.

Of these people, Matusz simply asked that an All Points Bulletin be put out on her family dog. And that's all it took for Gangnier and her colleagues, Even Gangnier's husband, Mark, a limousine driver, joined the effort.

After plenty of Nikki sightings and excellent communication between bus drivers and dispatchers, Darlene Matusz and her husband, Arnie, were directed to the 12 Mile and Inkster area ... and to Nikki.

All's well that ends well, as the saying goes. And in this case that's certainly true. Nikki is home warm, snug and safe with her family. And there are plenty of people who work for the Farmington Public Schools who should feel good about themselves and what they have done to help a family.

Gov's education agenda questioned

We'd never have guessed it 10 years ago, but it appears John Engler wants to mold his legacy as Michigan's Education Governor. With the state on rock-solid economic footing and the need for fiscal belt-tightening a distant memory of Engler's first term, the governor devoted half of last week's State of the State address to education issues.

So while the \$1 billion surplus, state income tax rate cut and further welfare reform efforts – seen as big-time gubernatorial accomplishments in previous years – drew polite applause, the gimmicky disbursement of "Golden Apple" cash incentives to high-achieving school districts was hailed as innovative and revolutionary by Engler supporters.

Whatever the governor's motivation, we're glad to see a renewed emphasis on strengthening K-12 education throughout the state. The Observer has long believed education is the cornerstone to building a sound environment for all Michigan families. It is one issue that ties directly into all else – everything from the state's continued economic prosperity, to the physical and mental health of its citizens, to public safety and the quality of life for Michigan residents.

And the governor wasn't just playing to the crowd in the House chamber. Engler has put forth some substantive proposals and set worthy goals with his latest initiatives. In particular, we praise the move to increase the state foundation grant for public education to \$6,500 per student from the current \$5,700, state-supplied laptop computers and Internet training for teachers and the governor's call to "tear down those walls" limiting student movement between districts. With these proposals, Engler is sending a strong signal to legislators that a cash-rich state needs to apply its resources to secure its future.

State Rep. Laura Toy, R-Livonia, said Engler is looking "to put some entrepreneurial spirit into education." We like that analogy. For too long, Michigan's educators have approached their field as being above and beyond the scope of performance measures

adopted by other disciplines. Many school districts have become mini-fiefdoms run by protective chiefs who believe they are immune to criticism from the outside world.

But while there's certainly a lot to like about this new-found Lansing "agenda," we continue to question the fairness and equity with which the Engler administration approaches education, particularly the traditional public school model that has been largely successful in Michigan since the 19th century.

And we wonder how an executive who buys so heavily into the philosophy that the (federal) government that governs least, governs best can with a straight face continue to push for more authority for the state to take over failing school districts, particularly urban districts where Democrats and unions hold sway.

We find it troubling that the governor's call for accountability on the part of educators seemingly applies only to traditional public schools. How else can we explain his "Principal's Bill of Rights," which includes exclusive authority to hire and fire building staff? Or his continued insistence that the cap on charter schools be lifted with no questions asked?

While charters offer families some needed alternatives, especially in troubled districts, there's no solid proof that the 1993 law allowing their creation has even marginally boosted student performance to date. With for-profit companies involved in charter school administration there needs to be more accountability, not less, if this experiment is to work.

Farmington Schools Superintendent Bob Maxfield summed up our thoughts best in his reaction to Engler's speech: "We ought to be happy he devoted most of his speech to education issues," Maxfield said. "But I wish some of the things he discussed would have been discussed with local districts ahead of time."

But then local control – or even accepting local input before drafting policy on such a critical issue – doesn't seem to fit in with the way Gov. John Engler approaches his job these days.

GEOF BROOKS



LETTERS

Opinions are to be shared: We welcome your ideas, that's why we offer this space for your opinions. We will help by editing for clarity. To assure authenticity we ask that you provide a contact telephone number and if mailing or faxing a letter, please sign it. Letters can be mailed to: Joanne Maliszewski, 33411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335, faxed to Joanne at (734) 459-2700 or emailed to jmaliszewski@oe.homecomm.net.

Time to solve

This month marks the 55th anniversary of the disappearance of Raoul Wallenberg, a tragic event that remains one of the 20th century's great unsolved mysteries. Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat based in Budapest, personally saved some 100,000 Jews in Hungary from certain death at the hands of the Nazis.

Creating and printing the Schuttpass, a Swedish protective passport, which he distributed to Jews on deportation trains and death marches, is one example of Wallenberg's extraordinary ingenuity and selfless courage.

While his valiant altruism is well documented, this important chapter in Holocaust history can never be closed without answering two questions: Why was Wallenberg arrested by Soviet agents on Jan. 17, 1945, and what happened to him after he entered the infamous Soviet gulag?

The American government has a special obligation to secure these answers because Wallenberg was employed by the U.S. War Refugee Board, an agency established in 1944 to try to save European Jews.

Washington has a new opportunity now to seek the cooperation of acting Russian President Putin to fully open the Soviet-era archives and reveal the truth.

As we enter a new century, it is time to solve the Wallenberg mystery once and for all.

Frederick J. Frank,
Chapter President
The American Jewish Committee,
Detroit Chapter

Defends ruling

Every homeowner in Michigan has a constitutional right to have his or her house assessed for property tax purposes at an amount not to exceed 50 percent of fair market value. This same constitutional safeguard applies to business property owners.

For over 20 years, the Michigan Chamber of Commerce has been a leader in Michigan's tax-limitation effort, fighting for tax relief for individuals and job providers. The purpose of this letter is to alert your readers to recent and troubling developments in southeast Michigan that threaten a fundamental principle of tax fairness for all property owners.

In Michigan, both real property (land and buildings) and personal property (business

equipment, machinery, and furnishings) are subject to the property tax. For over 30 years state government allowed local assessors to use increasingly out-of-date depreciation tables to set the value of personal property. This practice resulted in the widespread over-assessment of business property in violation of the state constitution.

In 1997, state government started a process to right this wrong. The governor and the Legislature agreed to spend \$600,000 to allow the State Tax Commission to hire a nationally recognized consulting firm to study the problem and recommend an entirely new set of depreciation tables for all business personal property. Both business and local government had the opportunity to participate in the property tax reform process conducted by the State Tax Commission. The reform process was fair, open, the subject of many public meetings, and a focus of legislative oversight. At the local level, assessors and taxpayers also had the opportunity to participate in the process.

In December 1998, Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara and some other local politicians decided to use tax dollars to file a frivolous lawsuit in Wayne County Circuit Court. The lawsuit asks the court to issue an injunction to prevent the State Tax Commission from using new depreciation tables that would result in more fair and accurate property tax assessments for gas and electric utility companies. For 106 years, Section 114 of the General Property Tax Act has clearly stated, "No injunction shall issue to stay the proceedings for assessment or collection of taxes under this act." This wasteful lawsuit is a classic example of taxpayer-funded lawsuit abuse. These county officials are obviously more concerned about maintaining current levels of property tax revenue than in complying with constitutional and statutory standards for property taxation.

This effort to block property tax reform must be stopped now, before it spreads. Today, it's energy companies that are being over-assessed. Tomorrow, it will be other businesses. If state government allows business property owners to be taxed unfairly, homeowners may be next.

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— Philip Power