

The Farmington Observer

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HOW TO REACH US

Susan Rosiek, Publisher (734) 953-2100 srosiek@oe.homecomm.net

Hugh Gallagher, Managing Editor (734) 951-2149 hgallagher@oe.homecomm.net

Joanne Maliszewski, Editor (248) 477-5450 jmaliszewski@oe.homecomm.net

Tom Smith, Reporter (248) 477-5450 smith@oe.homecomm.net

Mary Rodrigue, Community Life Editor (248) 477-5450 mrodrigue@oe.homecomm.net

Anna Lipar, Ad Representative (734) 953-2167 alipar@oe.homecomm.net

Bill Breske, Photographer (248) 477-5450 bbreske@oe.homecomm.net

Michelle Austin, Circulation Manager (734) 953-2242

Dan O'Neare, Sports Editor (734) 953-2131 donoare@oe.homecomm.net

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Are we listening?

School and city officials talk about kids

By TIM SHIFF
Staff Writer
tshiff@oe.homecomm.net

During a wide-ranging discussion that covered the waterfront, local city and school officials, and student leaders, last week delved into what could be done to ensure that what kids have to say doesn't fall on deaf ears.

"Are We Listening to Our Children?" was the name of the annual joint meeting of the Farmington and Farmington Hills city councils and Farmington Hills Fire Station No. 5.

"It's so good to have you here," said Farmington Hills Mayor Nancy Bates to the group of students. "Most of the time people ask what to do for you... It's time somebody asked you."

Most of the students, who attend several middle and high schools, talked about a desire to learn about what makes local government work. But they also said it is crucial to include other students in the process - namely, those in the silent majority, who typically do not join clubs or attend meetings about issues that affect them.

Finding ways to connect with all students was discussed at length, with ideas posed such as: taking Farmington Hills City Council meetings "on the road" to schools; becoming a student representative for the Farmington Downtown Development Authority; and inviting kids to shadow city officials for several weeks.

One student said a meeting with kids might work, but only if it was presented in a way that kids wouldn't feel as if they were being lectured.

Farmington High School junior Raj Bingham Bedi emphasized that a group discussion during Student Managed Academic Resource Time (SMART) with students and city officials would work better than officials meeting on stage with students listening from their auditorium seats, for example.

"The majority of guys (at school) don't know you guys exist," said Raj to city officials. "Make yourself known. Show yourself to the kids."

He continued that youngsters need to "want" to participate in such communication efforts.

Meanwhile, discussing staging possible city meetings at schools, Farmington Hills city council member Cheryl Oliverio reassured students that they weren't "trying to recruit" them for city boards and commissions. The objective of meetings would be for officials to better understand what problems and concerns are



Superintendent Bob Maxfield



Farmington Mayor Bill Hartsock



Hills Mayor Nancy Bates

on their minds. "You kids are the elite," Oliverio said. "We need to grab the kids who aren't."

Farmington city council member JoAnna McShane suggested ways for the general student body to learn about the workings of local government. One idea was for middle school students to be required to attend council meetings.

McShane also mentioned efforts such as Michigan Week and Student Government Day, the latter in which high school students "portray" administrators and council members during a mock meeting. "There are ways we could extend that to so many other people."

Concurring were two of McShane's colleagues, Arnie Campbell and Farmington Mayor Bill Hartsock.

"Ninety percent (of students) don't know the function of city government and probably a lot of them think Farmington and Farmington Hills are the same city," Campbell said.

He talked about, at FHS, for example, SMART time being used for student leaders to take what they observed during the Student Government Day back to other students, during classroom discussions. "It's not about how to construct a bond issue (proposal)," Hartsock said. "But it's (about) issues that affect your daily lives. It's putting together tailgate parties and doing things we can really connect with."

Hartsock did say that "from time to time there's a missing link" in terms of student awareness of government. "But you don't know unless you're told."

The test: Kicking off the meeting was a

■ 'The majority of guys (at school) don't know you guys exist. Make yourself known. Show yourself to the kids.'

Raj Bingham Bedi

-Farmington junior to city officials

speech by federal bankruptcy judge Roy Reynolds-Graves. He stressed preparing for the ultimate "test" of life, from which they would later be called upon to lead the United States.

But Reynolds-Graves also said American schools needed strengthening. Suggestions included year-round schools, and a national standardized test as a graduation requirement.

"Simulate thinking that there is a core curriculum, that for some reason we've abandoned the last 30 years," Reynolds-Graves said. "And we need to find a way to get back to that if we are to return to where we were."

The judge continued to emphasize that American public schools, in some instances, have been misguided in recent decades.

"Public education is not (about) self-esteem," Reynolds-Graves said. "It's getting ready to lead this country and lead this world. That's enough self-esteem for you."

Later during the meeting, North Farmington High School junior Lauren Zakalik said the judge's idea of a national test was something she disagreed with.

"It wouldn't be fair," Zakalik said, "because there are so many different kinds of learning. Not everybody learns the same way... ACT's and SAT's are overrated."

Farmington Hills Mayor Pro-Tem Jerry Ellis supported a national test because it would be

viewed the same way the Michigan Educational Assessment Program is, as a "report card" to the community.

"It affects property taxes, what kinds of businesses are attracted to a community," said Ellis.

Schools Superintendent Bob Maxfield, answering a question from Ellis, said that districts would have to make "a fair effort" to make sure students be given basic information that they might be tested on.

But school board member Cathy Webb urged caution over a national test, not to give it more importance than other tools used to gauge student and school district performance, "so we're not just graduating test-takers."

Following the meeting, several students said they were inspired by the judge's comments and that the joint session was a good jumping-off point for connecting kids and their communities.

Harrison High School senior Ed Cleland said he agreed with Reynolds-Graves concept of a "test of life."

"I don't think 'the test' is necessarily what we do in class or on the MCAP," Cleland said. "But it's about what we do outside class."

Cleland speaks from experience. He is president of the RAGE student club, which began at Harrison and is branching out to the other two high schools. The club discusses social topics and participates in projects.

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