

Paperless agendas

Public, media need pipeline

The shuffling of paper – sometimes mounds of it – will be replaced with the clicking of computer keys in the Farmington Hills City Council chamber beginning Monday, March 20.

That's when the city council will officially switch from heavy paper packets of information about issues before them to the same information in laptop computers.

The move not only keeps council members up with the ever-changing technological world, but it will reduce time and expense for the city clerk's office, which has long prepared the onerous paper packets.

As with any change, adjustment will take place, as well as concern.

Our continuing concern remains the protection of the state's Open Meetings Act. City Attorney John Donohue last week cautioned city council members on the use of their new technological paper saver and adherence to the law that requires public deliberation and decision making by an elected body.

We urge the city council to wisely heed Donohue's caution. The Open Meeting's Act is a serious and useful tool for open government and protection of the public's interest.

An electronic chat about city issues between council members would violate the act and the public's trust and interest. Though sending e-mails to other council members,

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according to Donohue, would be the same as sending a memo, we nonetheless urge caution.

People are just people. And it's easy for a council member to figure you can just send a message or two to a couple of colleagues to get a point across. Sounds simple enough but it also reeks of deliberation and decision making in a non-public forum.

As Donohue cautioned, the city council cannot do on their computers what they know they cannot – according to the Open Meetings Act – do on a telephone.

We are encouraged that city administrators will continue to have paper documents at the city clerk's office, especially for those who do not have computers at home. However, those documents can be downloaded by request.

It will be interesting to watch this technological change. The city council should enjoy this new-found freedom – and responsibility – from reams of paper. But they should also know that the public and the media are watching.

Alcohol measure too drastic

It may look like a solid idea, but when examined, the state Legislature's proposal to block the sale of alcohol over the Internet to minors just doesn't hold water.

First, the sale of alcohol to minors is already illegal here.

Second, there is absolutely no evidence that youngsters are getting alcohol through the Internet now.

And when done in the manner put forward by Rep. Nancy Cassia, R-Nowi, through House Bill 4752, the legislation would impose a restraint on trade for the small business operations that make up the fine winemaking industry, including Michigan's two dozen wineries.

Most importantly, HB 4752 would significantly limit choices for consumers – that's you, dear reader.

Wine lovers statewide need to set down their stemware and pick up pens to write lawmakers in opposition to HB 4752.

Vintners and connoisseurs claim the concerns raised about minors gaining access to alcohol over the Internet are really a "smoke-screen," that the real purpose is to preserve the monopoly wholesalers now have on the distribution of spirits here in Michigan. The state's "three-tier" system requires that all alcohol be distributed through wholesalers. E-commerce bypasses them, threatening that monopoly.

Cassia and the Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association deny it, as you'd expect, but their protestations are unconvincing given the lack of evidence that youths are buying alcohol over the Internet.

Congressional hearings last March on related legislation at the federal level failed to produce evidence. Cassia can't point to any. Nor can the wholesalers.

Even Michigan's Liquor Control Commission, responsible for enforcing the liquor laws here, can't point to a single known case of a juvenile ordering beer, wine or booze over the

World Wide Web, other than in a "sting" operation.

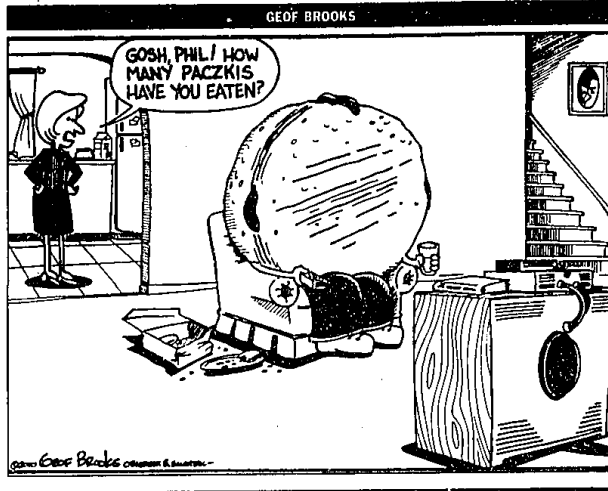
When Attorney General Jennifer Granholm conducted a series of stings recently – which she used to arm-wrestle United Parcel Service into agreeing to stop deliveries of alcoholic beverages from out of state – it appears to have worked only because the youngsters themselves weren't going to get in trouble. Acting as decoys on behalf of law enforcement, those teens were protected from prosecution as they submitted their orders for alcohol.

It's different in the real world. Youngsters have good reason to avoid using the Internet to obtain booze. Any youth attempting to order it by wire would create a paper trail, not the least of which is an itemized credit card bill that any parent who is paying any attention at all is likely to catch.

Regardless of this lack of evidence, the state is headed toward cutting off Michigan consumers – including those who are of legal drinking age – from an estimated 1,900 to 1,950 wine producers across the country. It is estimated that wholesalers can reasonably distribute product from only 50 or 100 of the country's 2,000 wineries. Without Internet sales or delivery services like UPS, there will be little possibility they can get their products to their Michigan consumers.

That is indeed a serious restraint on trade, a substantial limitation on consumer choice. HB 4752 was approved by the House of Representatives without opposition, but it now awaits action in the Economic Development Committee in the Senate.

Wine lovers can explain their objections to the bill by writing to committee members Sen. Bill Schuette, R-Midland, Thaddeus McCotter, R-Livonia, David Jave, R-Washington Township, Burton Leland, D-Detroit, and Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township, at Michigan State Senate, P.O. Box 30036, Lansing, MI 48909-7536.



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) 469-2700 or emailed to jmaliszewski@oc.homecomm.net

Leaves me wondering

I was disturbed by state Rep. Andrew Raczowski's reaction to former Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi's candidacy for the state House of Representatives.

His statement that "when a vote comes up where it's cities versus citizens, I side with the citizens," leaves me wondering what he means. Do the citizens not elect city governments?

Farmington and Farmington Hills have won national acclaim for the way they provide services.

Our local governments have been recognized for their excellence in every area. Aldo Vagnozzi has worked hard to open up city government in his years of public service, as councilmember and mayor of Farmington Hills.

Rep. Raczowski is absolutely wrong to claim our city officials don't represent us. The last city election showed the solid support of residents for their elected officials.

Mr. Raczowski sponsored and supports legislation that would not allow city ordinances to be any stronger than state law, claiming that this supports citizens over government.

But in southwest Farmington Hills that law would have prevented the city from stopping an oil drilling operation in a residential neighborhood.

In this example, among many, the city supported the local citizens and Mr. Raczowski's legislation would have forced that neighborhood to accept oil drilling they didn't want.

Mr. Raczowski may laugh off the suggestion that his leadership PAC's donors influence his votes, but I can only wonder what the big donors and lobbyists expect, and get, for their money. The oil drillers may have been state residents (who knows), but the local citizens opposed what they wanted to do to a residential neighborhood.

Who deserves more support from our representative in Lansing, big industry and contributors or his constituents?

I call on Mr. Raczowski to apologize to the city officials of Farmington and Farmington Hills for insinuating that they do not act to protect the best interests of their residents. And I ask him to reconsider his legislation that would rob local government of the ability to protect their citizens.

Home rule is an important tradition that needs protection, not abandonment.

James Nash
Farmington Hills

PACs call the shots

Fidle hands are the devil's workshop then the Michigan Legislature must be his factory outlet mall.

While your newspaper from time to time alludes to the evils of PAC contributions, I have never seen your writing staff go into much detail on how common this practice is or how it's been honed to a high art form by our own State Rep. Andrew Raczowski and his "Raczowski Leadership Fund" (PAC).

For those who desire more details on Andy's PAC might I suggest the Michigan Secretary of State's Web page under elections; campaign finance statements; political committees (PACs). Be prepared for a long download.

While the people of this community are out there working hard and paying their taxes our elected representative has nothing but time on his hands, calling on corporate leaders collecting dozens of PAC checks.

Moonlighting as a lobbyist himself he redistributes the money to other House members and local candidates. Even Aldo Vagnozzi hasn't ruled out playing the PAC game, probably because he knows both parties are doing it.

The word "reform" seems to be on the lips of every incumbent these days.

If the Democrats and Republicans were really serious about getting rid of the PAC contributions they would have done it a long time ago.

As long as the hard working people of this community keep wasting their votes on these kinds of people don't expect a single thing to change.

If you really want Reform might I suggest you start by voting for it.

Eric Borregard
Reform Party Candidate
State House 37th District

COMMUNITY VOICE

QUESTION:

Do you think that winter is over?

We asked this question outside the Farmington branch of the Farmington Community Library.



"No, we're probably going to get another storm. By no means is it over."
Tony Boffini
Farmington DPS



"I don't think it is. I think we're going to get more snow ... and I hate winter."
Marquies Bepko
Farmington Hills



"I wish I'm praying."
Kevin Johnson
Farmington Hills



"It's gone. I like to play in the snow. My snowman melted."
Alex Johnson
Farmington Hills

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— Philip Power