

Election makes an animated online topic

By DOUG JOHNSON
STAFF WRITER

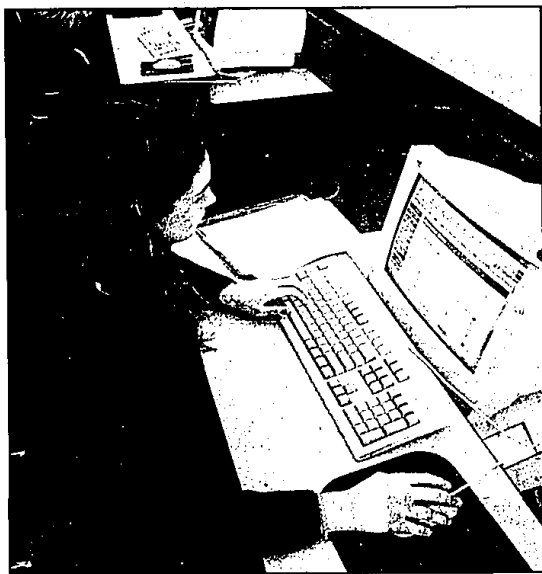
Lisa Sievert's government classes at Farmington High School found the recent national election good fodder for a lot of debate and discussion — not only amongst themselves but also in an online discussion board.

Sievert, who describes herself as a "political junkie," said the recent heightened debate over who won the election has "been a good experience for the students."

"But there were a lot of hard feelings, too, between Democratic and Republican students."

Sievert's students used a "course," flag-government, through the huge blackboard.com Web site. Blackboard operates out of Washington, D.C., and offers "e-learning" infrastructure to schools, colleges and universities. They sell software and provide, among other things, a course site channel where instructors can set up free discussion boards such as "flaggovernment."

Michigan senator-elect Debbie Stabenow spoke to Sievert's government class sixth hour before the election. But after the election, as the nation went through the arduous



STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL BRADLEY

Online: Alexis Johnson works with blackboard.com's discussion board in the Farmington High School computer lab. Below, left, is one of her opinions showing up online.

High classroom. "One thing we talked about was judicial activism. The students knew the (U.S. Supreme) court was conservative and generally applauded the decisions. We also talked about how hard President-elect Bush's job will be," Sievert said.

They loved the appointment of Colin Powell (as Secretary of State)," she said. She said her students don't see the value

of the electoral college.

"The biggest issue finally became 'why do we spend so little on our elections?' This is a generation that expects to vote on the Internet."

Sievert, a Central Michigan University graduate, is in her third year as a teacher at Farmington High. She has as part of her assignment three government classes.

Chamber reaches membership goal of 825 in 2000

By JONI HUBBARD
STAFF WRITER

All Y2Kidding aside, 2000 was a banner year for the Farmington/Farmington Hills Area Chamber of Commerce.

"We had a fantastic year," said President Carleigh Flaharty. "One of our goals was to increase membership to 825, and we did that."

Flaharty said goals for the coming year center on continued growth while still providing key services to existing members. New board members will meet this month to look at goals for the coming year, which will likely parallel those set last year — including increased membership, greater community involvement and involvement in government affairs.

"The goals that came out of last year are on-going," Flaharty said.

The Chamber will survey members to determine what issues are important to them. Positions are closely aligned with the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, which is looking at living wage issues and speeding up the process to roll back the Single Business Tax, which businesses pay on depreciation of equipment and fixtures.

Members are also gearing up for the annual business dinner on Jan. 25, and the biggest event of the year, a business expo in April. Held at the Costick Activities Center, the Expo has been expanded to two days and will be a "business-to-business" networking event, Flaharty said.

Farmington Hills Economic Development Commission Chair John Anhut would like to see more done for businesses in the coming year. The EDC reviewed requests for tax abatements for companies like Bosch and Harman Enterprises, but Anhut would like to see some kind of assistance for smaller businesses as well.

"We could use the EDC to underwrite loans for reinvestment," he said.

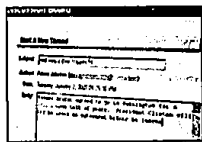
The EDC is also committed to maintaining a 65/35 split between the residential and business tax base, to keep property taxes low, Anhut said. He'd like to see the Grand River project completed, as continued redevelopment eliminates eyesores like the abandoned Boatyard property.

Commissioners aren't only interested in bricks and mortar projects, however. The coming year will bring an expansion of a mentoring program that teams local students with business people, Anhut said.

"I hope we'll double it," he said. "That means we'll have to have more volunteers, but we'll get 'em."

Anhut would also like to see more community spirit between Farmington and Farmington Hills, sharing common interests in the historic Governor Warner Mansion and Civic Theatre, the Founders Festival and Botsford Hospital.

"And we'll keep selling the idea that Farmington Hills is a great place to live and to work," he added.



City council tables merchants' request for outdoor displays

By TIM SMITH
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FARMINGTON

Downtown Farmington merchants will need to come up with more-specific criteria if they are to be permitted to put awareness-building displays and sandwich-board signs on sidewalks in front of their stores.

During last week's Farmington City Council meeting, the merchants' request for a six-month trial period was tabled. The request was made by a committee from the Downtown Farmington Business Association and Downtown Development Authority, which developed a list of criteria.

Council members want more information, as well as documentation about whether other downtown business districts are having success with a similar program.

"I didn't want to shoot the concept down, but clearly it needs a lot of work," said Mayor Bill Hartsock immediately following the Wednesday, Jan. 3 meeting.

"If it's working in another community, let's benefit from that," Hartsock said it is crucial that any policy or ordinance be "very specific" and clear, to promote uniformity and enforcement. "It's important that what's fair for one is fair for another."

In order for such a request to be approved, the council would need to grant variances to the city's sign ordinance.

After it became apparent the request was not going to be approved, DDA Executive Director Judy Downey said "we'll research this further and (decide) whether to approach council again."

Representing the DFBA at the council session were Diane Cassidy and Deb Watson, respectively of Village Hidden Treasures and Deb's Crafts, two independent Grand River shops.

"Signs increase business," said Cassidy to the council. "They let

people know we're open, that we're a retail business."

Watson, who last week announced she is closing her store and going to a scaled-down at-home operation, noted that stores need every chance they can get to help combat competition from larger malls and the Internet.

The council unanimously supported the idea of helping merchants enhance awareness of their businesses. But Hartsock and others emphasized the need to have additional details on aspects such as presentation of displays, the size of sandwich boards and how they must be made and maintained, for example.

"Even though I've never had a retail store," said Hartsock to the merchants, "you look for all avenues and ways to advertise your services and goods. And visibility obviously is a key when it comes to storefront retailing."

"But when I look at this, I have the ... initial reaction, 'Yeah, it seems like it could work. But right now there is more of a downside than an upside to this.'"

The list of criteria proposed included allowing displays and outdoor signs for a 26-week period, on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Other provisions included making sure displays and signs are tasteful and professional and do not create vision obstruction or other safety hazards for pedestrians and motorists.

Currently, businesses are permitted to display and sell goods outside, as long as they have a special permit.

And Downey said merchants can put out temporary signs for official DDA events, such as the Summer Fun Series and Farmer's Market, for example.



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