

Engler's hybrid university boards deserve consideration

After 11 years in office, Gov. John Engler certainly isn't afraid to reshuffle the political deck. In this week's State of the State speech, the governor makes two far-reaching proposals. He thinks Michigan Supreme Court Justices should be appointed, not elected as they are now. And he wants to change the structure of the boards of the Big Three universities — University of Michigan, Michigan State and Wayne State — by adding to the currently elected eight-member boards



Phil Power

seven bipartisan appointees. Engler's views on appointing Supreme Court Justices are likely to draw the most media and political interest. But his suggestions for statewide education posts are equally important and should not be overlooked. (Readers should know that I served as a Regent of the U-M for 11 years, so I'm either biased or well informed — or both! — on this subject.)

Plainly, Michigan's great research universities are among our crown jewels, dead center in any effort to diversify our economy by transferring discoveries from laboratories into the rapidly growing high tech sector. But universities are subtle and complex places, institutions where poor board governance can wreak havoc in a short time, as anybody who has followed the history of MSU knows full well.

Michigan's current method of picking board members leaves a lot to be desired.

First, they're elected statewide in November elections in even numbered years, which virtually guarantees no voter has any idea who is running or what the candidates' qualifications or views might be. Result: The election outcome is not much more than a crap shoot. Candidates win if their party does well in that particular election or if they're female (women tend to run at least 100,000 votes ahead of men).

Second, candidates get on the ballot by nomination at the Republican and Democratic state conventions. But as a practical matter, potential candidates from both parties are subject to litmus tests at convention time. Republicans have to be anti-abortion enough to get safely Right to Life, while Democrats have to have organized labor and affirmative action for both minorities and women.

Third, as a result of both these problems, increasingly few able and experienced candidates are willing to undergo litmus-like scrutiny during the nomination process only to emerge into an election with an entirely random outcome. I've personally spent hundreds of hours trying to recruit candidates; believe me,

it's a tough job.

Engler's proposal gets at this problem in an imaginative way. He retains the existing eight elected board slots — a good idea that maintains universities' independent Constitutional status and subjects board members to the scrutiny of the people during elections. But he adds seven bipartisan appointed members — no more than four of any one party — to create a kind of hybrid board of 15. The idea is to use the appointment method to recruit men and women of unusual experience and talent who otherwise could not be persuaded to undergo the thrash of running for a university board.

Of course, there are objections to an idea as

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far-reaching as this. But upon scrutiny, each fails.

A 15-member board is too large, some will claim. Nonsense. Most corporate boards run from 10-20 members, which allows boards to develop a committee system that helps members develop specialized knowledge of important subject.

Those who resent Gov. Engler's fierce partisanship will object on principle to gubernatorial appointments. However, Engler's proposal is specifically designed to take effect only after he leaves office. Moreover, the four-three party balance required of appointees immunizes against concerns that adding appointed board members might result in an excessively partisan board.

The most common objection will be "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." In my view, this fails because it accepts the present flawed system as the best we can do.

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Engler's proposal deserves serious consideration, not knee-jerk rejection.

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Jim Pfeiffer

Council didn't listen to 97 percent of residents

You should know what happened at the Tuesday, Jan. 16 Farmington City Council meeting — the meeting where council decided whether or not to rezone the old 33432 Oakland Street home in our Historic District to "Central Business District" and put a business in there.

(A week earlier the planning commission voted 10 to 1 in favor of rezoning the home, despite a standing room only crowd of angry residents who wanted to keep the house a home.)

We actually thought council and the mayor were going to represent the people of Farmington. We thought that, being elected officials, they were going to render a vote that reflected their constituents. The room was packed with people. Some had to stand out in the hall. And council voted 4 to 1 to rezone the home to "Central Business District."

Right in our faces. Boy, we were stupid. We know this because (most) council members and (especially) the mayor belittled and demeaned us repeatedly that night. We presented a petition signed by more than 100 Farmington residents who opposed the rezoning. The petition almost didn't make it into the record; the mayor proclaimed that only three people would be allowed to speak before the vote, including the two neighbors adjacent to the old home.

Nice try. Why let anyone speak if you weren't going to listen to begin with? The signatures came primarily from the Historic District.

How did we get the signatures? Was it fixed? Yeah, right. It was fixed in the sense that we went door-to-door over a three day period. If you were home we presented the petition to you. If you were against the rezoning you signed it.

It was that simple. A whopping 97 percent of Farmington residents who were presented the petition signed it. Ninety-seven percent of you were opposed to the rezoning.

Some of you knew about the issue and grabbed the pen and signed your name. Some of you were just hearing about it for the first time, but you got so mad you yanked the pen from our hands and signed your name.

Do you know what the mayor said about your signatures? He said they "didn't mean anything."

He said you just signed your names to be polite. He said your 97 percent opposition rate was meaningless. He really said that. Makes you feel all warm and fuzzy, doesn't it?

Back to the "stupid" part: They said we should have spoken up in 1998 when the revised master plan was written. They said there was publicity all over the place about the revised master plan. However, research checks show there was only one master plan article in the Observer.

We missed it. But that's OK. It's only the master plan for the entire city of Farmington. No big deal. (The fact that the master plan is an adjustable work in progress fell on deaf ears, too, by the way.) They bragged that the historical commission "officially" approved this deal. The fact that the historical commission can't "officially" approve anything wasn't mentioned.

Council also said we should be more "active" in the community boards and commissions, etc. They implied we're not interested in the goings-on in Farmington. They said this to an overflowing roomful of "active" community residents who have "actively" opposed the rezoning for many weeks!

The fact is, council didn't listen. They were never going to listen in the first place because this was a done deal from the beginning.

We'll never know all the facts — we'll never know what happened behind closed doors that culminated in this deal. But we do know this: Council has lost the trust of many, many citizens. (Not the Farmington "power brokers" who sometimes cause deals like this to happen. Citizens. With a capital "C." As in "voters.")

We will not forget. We will be watching our local government more closely now than they've ever been watched before.

And if council, the planning commission and the ZBA haven't learned from the rooms full of people and the piles of letters this issue has spawned, then it's time for a new council that does represent Farmington's citizens.

Jim Pfeiffer lives on Farmington Road in the Historic District. A former full-time musician and teacher, he is now a free-lance writer.

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