

## State business halts while pols take care of their future

I have long suspected that the best way to figure out what's really important in life is to look carefully at the behavior of our legislative masters in Lansing. Last week's news comes as confirmation of the principle.

Lawmakers adjourned for their two-month summer vacation. (Two months? Yup. Our lawmakers don't go back to work until mid-September.) Before they left Lansing, the legislature:



Phil Power

■ Passed — right on time — redistricting plans for districts for the U.S. House of Representatives and both the state House and Senate.

Ambitious lawmakers can now start making timely plans for their 2002 campaigns.

■ Failed to pass a budget for higher education. The fiscal year for Michigan schools and most colleges starts on July 1, the normal target date to decide how much money they will receive. But this year administrators will just have to twiddle their thumbs until the Legislature takes its own sweet time to work out a spending plan later this fall.

■ Failed to pass a budget for K-12 schools. This is serious, too, because kids will be back in the classroom before the legislature reconvenes. Moreover, with tax revenues weak from a down economy, the state's promised foundation grant of \$6,500 per pupil is at risk if the governor is the one who has to do the cutting. Lawmakers can save it, if only they pass a budget. So, for the first part of their fiscal year, school districts will be flying blind about how much they can spend.

■ Failed to pass legislation defining what constitutes a "failing school" and establishing appropriate responses. Mike Malott, director of the statewide news service that serves this newspaper, thinks this is the most important initiative now before the legislature. The senate passed the package earlier this year, but the house has yet to start work on it. Another school year will have started before lawmakers deal with the question of what to do about our worst-performing schools.

■ Failed to pass legislation on improving water quality by providing more money to fix up leaky sewer systems. Lawmakers started the year trumpeting about this critical issue requiring fast action. Not now.

A couple of other big issues fell off the table in the rush to adjourn, but I'm sure you get the basic idea.

Clearly, we've all learned to admire the basic axiom of political life in the legislature: What's mine is mine and what's yours (or the public's) is negotiable.

When it comes to serious matters like the boundaries of legislative and congressional districts that directly affect the political future of the political class, you can absolutely count on detailed and timely work by the legislature. But when it comes to relatively trivial matters like spending plans for schools and colleges for our kids and pure water for our state, there's plenty of time to wait. After all, the state's fiscal year doesn't begin until Oct. 1, so it's just their tough luck that the folks running schools and colleges have to begin their year without a firm budget from the state.

Of course, there's a lot of finger-pointing going on. Senators are harrumphing that inexperienced members of the newly term-limited House have no idea how to construct a budget when times are tough. And house members are grumbling that certain senior members of the senate — Dan DeGrow, who has a lot to say about school financing, is the main target — loaded up the budget bill with pork.

That's mostly spin. The fact is that lawmakers got distracted for much of this year by redistricting, a close competitor to money in the hierarchy of things that define political success. Republicans got tangled up in intramural fights between house members wanting to run for the senate, while Democrats have already sued in U.S. District Court about Gerrymandered districts.

As things stand now, the legislature is the body that makes decisions about redistricting. And when confronted with that issue, lawmakers seem to have trouble concentrating on anything else.

Mike Malott thinks that for the legislature to make redistricting decisions is an intrinsic conflict of interest. He's got a point. Certainly the business of the state ought not come to a grinding halt while the pols take care of their political futures.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net)

## Temporary dog park meets non-dog person's standard

I am not a dog person.

Even when I had a dog, I was not a dog person. I was a person who, cajoled by my children, happened to have a dog.

So what am I doing at 8:30 on a Sunday morning on the soccer field at North Farmington High School at a make-shift dog park?

I was invited by Jane Raitt, a West Bloomfield dog owner who is spokeswoman for Parks for Urban Pups (PUPS Inc.), a group that appears to be successfully persuading that township to create a dog park.

I wanted to experience what this trend, afoot both locally and nationally, was all about. Six years ago, the nation had 20 dog parks, according to a story in the June 22nd issue of USA Today. The count is now over 500.

I'm told that dog owners have been getting together at this school site for a couple of years. It's interesting that it's located in Farmington Hills, since that city has been more reluctant than neighboring West Bloomfield on the dog park issue.

The field is fenced but has gaps that an early-bird dog owner has filled in with bright orange plastic temporary barriers. Owners (20 or so) gather in clumps to talk and keep an eye on their dogs (30 or so), who, for the most part, are off and running. Several have two dogs, like Sid and Ingrid Grossberg who introduce me to Garth ("he doesn't leave our side") and Maxie, their Portuguese water dogs.

Although the PUPS Inc. dog park proposal numbers a dozen pages, the most immediate rules for the here and now are no fighting (for the dogs) and clean up messes (for the people). Dogs in heat aren't allowed. Neither are children without a parent.

It's very interesting to watch the social interaction of dogs," says Pat Solomon, a West Bloomfield resident, who like everyone else carries a ready supply of plastic bags. "See no one's fighting. Everyone's just happy."

The group polices itself. A couple of barking instances belie that some dog is getting on another's nerves. They are quickly intercepted as are dog messes.

On the rare occasion when someone brings an aggressive dog, I'm told, they are asked to leave and to come back when the animal has more social skills.

Various owners give me various reasons for their attendance and desire for permanent dog parks in their hometowns.

"We've met really nice people," Ingrid says. "On a purely selfish basis, the dogs are tired for the rest of the day," Sid adds. "They get so excited when I tell them, 'It's Sunday morning and we're going to puppy playgroup.'"

"My dog Forester, a Great Pyrenees, comes every Sunday with either me or my husband," says Susan Greenbaum, a Farmington Hills mother of four pre-schoolers including recent twins. "Some people play baseball or mahjong every week. This is what we do."

"She needs the exercise," says Julie Levin of her new puppy, Stella. "She'd destroy my (Farmington Hills) house. It helped her learn how to get along with other dogs. When there's a new dog, they surround her (or him). She was afraid. Now she's fine with it."

"You can't take a dog even on leash in any Farmington Hills park," Jess Elson tells me, introducing me to Josh and Jake. "I've got a petition that we're signing for Farmington Hills."

Several new people show up this day. One is Julie Nickerson of Farmington with her greyhounds, Jake and Otis. "We don't have a big yard so this is great," Nickerson says.

By 9:30 a.m., almost all the dogs and owners are gone. The temporary barriers are being removed and some owners will continue the camaraderie over coffee.

About 40 million families in the United States have dogs — up from 35 million a decade ago, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. Oakland County has 57,000 dogs that are licensed, and, no one knows how many that aren't.

Even so, a dog park is clearly an amenity, not a necessity. If a community can come up with an area that doesn't infringe on non-dog people, can figure a way to finance it, and can ensure the responsibility of dog owners, it's worth considering.

As a non-dog person, I can testify that it's kind of nice having a park that's going to the dogs.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is a former managing editor of *The Eclectic Newspapers*. You can comment by calling (734) 953-2047, in a traditional letter to the editor, or e-mailing [jberne@att.net](mailto:jberne@att.net)

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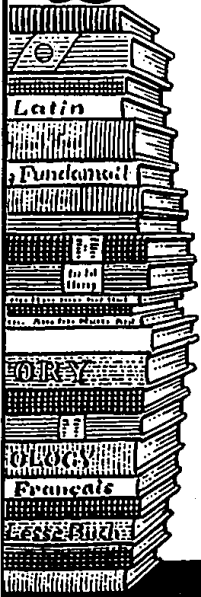
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