

## Farmington Observer

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*Our fundamental purposes are to enhance the lives of our readers, nurture the hometowns we serve and contribute to the business success of our customers.*

## Legislature helps itself, we'll just have to wait

It would be difficult to review the actions of the Michigan state Legislature this past year without sounding pretty cynical.

The year 2001 was not a productive time in Lansing – at least not for Michigan residents.

Elected officials made out all right however.

Senators and representatives started out the year with those nice big pay raises, 36 percent. Even though it was pretty clear by January that the economy was headed south for a while, lawmakers couldn't find a way to bring the State Officers Compensation Commission recommendations to a vote in the Senate.

By year's end of course, the budget was getting trimmed, lawmakers had to get 5 percent out of the budget in the fall to avoid an executive order cut that would have simply chopped that much off the spending plan across the board, and more is expected to come out when they start up their session again after the turn of the year. There remain old budget issues that lawmakers have not resolved, like the Durant lawsuits and fully funding special education.

Of course, by the end of 2001, lawmakers had fixed that soCCC pay setting system. They voted for a Senate resolution to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot, for the approval of voters, a change in the soCCC they say will bring more accountability in the legislature for pay raises ... which will take effect after the vast majority of sitting senators have left office.

Let's see ... what else did they accomplish? Oh yeah, redistricting!

The once-a-decade process of redrawing legislative district boundaries according the latest census counts might not rank high on the list of priorities for the average resident, but it dominated the political landscape in Lansing for a significant portion of the year.

In the end, pundits largely agree, it was not the Republican gerrymander they'd feared given the GOP's dominance in the legislature and the governor's office.

But the key point was that it got settled, giving politicos plenty of time to lay their election plans for coming runoffs in the fall of 2002 and the GOP will maintain its majority.

### Citizens' concerns?

In the meantime, issues common citizens might care a little more about, issues that were said to be top priorities for lawmakers at the beginning of 2001, for all intents and purposes had fallen off virtually every political radar screen in Lansing by year's end.

A good example is the issue of failing schools. Readers will recall the vote on vouchers on the statewide ballot a year ago last fall. The issue revolved largely around a small number of urban, inner-city schools that don't seem to be giving their students a very good educational program.

At the start of 2001, House Republican leaders held a press conference to outline

their agenda for education. They wanted to put together special teams of educators and administrators who could be sent to low performing school districts to figure out what could be done to turn them around. Education "swat teams" is what the chair of the House Education Committee called them.

By the end of the spring, senators had sent the House a bill that looked a lot like that. To date, no action has been taken.

### High-tech agenda

Technology and the economy were high on the state's agenda for the year. Gov. John Engler made that clear in his state of the state address early in 2001. He had two things in particular on his mind, the so called "streamlined sales tax" – a plan that would essentially allow the state to collect taxes on items sold across the Internet – and bringing broadband to the majority of the state so residents and businesses here could universally get high speed access.

There are a lot of pros and cons to the sales tax issue. Analysts differ on its likely effect on the economy. It should be more fair to bricks and mortar businesses, but high tech companies might not find the state quite as attractive.

What cannot be argued is that it will increase tax revenue. The bill got passed handily and rather quickly.

The governor's broadband proposals weren't even introduced until year's end. Readers may be starting to see a pattern here.

Readers may also recall the meltdown in the elections process in Florida during last year's presidential race that kept us guessing for a month who the next president would be.

That put elections reform at the top of many politicos' agendas and lawmakers spent many hours in committee hearings and meetings taking input on what can be done to improve Michigan's voting systems. Turns out state broadband is in pretty good shape overall, but there could be improvements.

What did lawmakers do, they eliminated straight party voting? That was an idea that had never surfaced in hearings. No voter had complained to committees that straight party balloting was somehow a problem. Sponsors said the elimination would force voters to pay closer attention to their ballots. So somehow, the emphasis of election reform shifted from making it easier to count voters' ballots to purposely making it more difficult for voters because it's "good" for them.

In reality it's a purely partisan move likely to help Republicans, who tend to split their tickets anyway, and hurt Democrats who often cast ballots in those crowded, backed up precincts in central city areas.

It has not been a productive year for state residents, but we would urge lawmakers to get back to the people's agenda when they return to action in coming year.

## We'll take a cup of kindness

We are many miles away from the guns of Afghanistan.

In journalism classes the term "Afghanistanism" is used derisively to mock those lazy, pretentious newspapers that devote great space to analyzing problems in faraway places while ignoring the life going on right under their noses.

But suddenly Afghanistan isn't so distant. American forces are there. Sons, daughters, husbands and wives, some from our own communities, are wrapping up a war in a place that seems to have remained unchanged since biblical days, except for the ever present kashmiriks slung over the shoulders of prematurely aged young men.

The world's problems have become our problems. Millions of people have been left homeless, hungry, fearful and sick by terrorism and war in Afghanistan, the Middle East and central Africa. Families once whole have been torn asunder by the heedless insanity of fanaticism. Men and women who had been riding the crest of an unprecedented prosperity now find themselves unemployed with few prospects for the near future.

Very few of us have been left unhurt by

this awful year. Even before Sept. 11, there was uneasiness. The economy was already tanking. A new president took office in a disputed election with not even a plurality of the vote. The situation in the Middle East was breaking down.

Sept. 11, a date now seared in our memory forever, shook our confidence because it brought the world's horrors home. For many New York City was also a distant place – a cold, fast, heartless city unlike the rest of America. But in the face of great tragedy it proved to be the very heart of America.

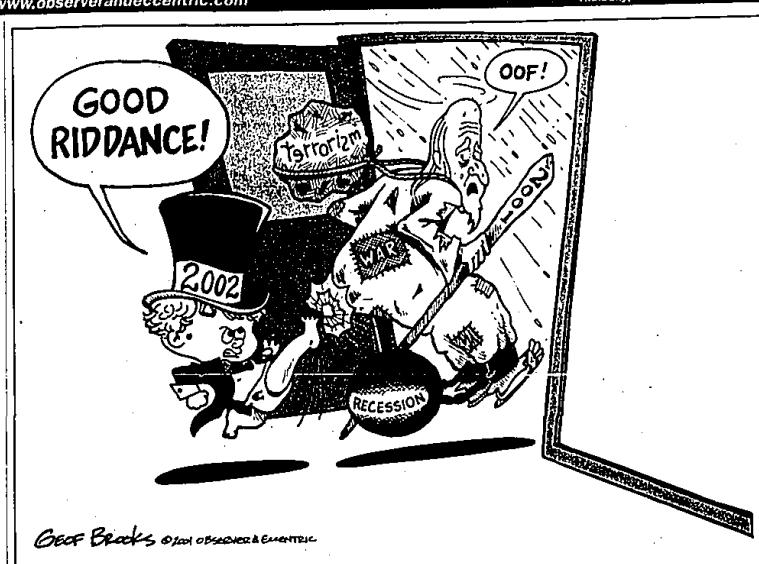
So we are not sad to see 2001 go. Next week we will end this year as we usually do by turning again to the bitter-sweet words of Bobby Burns set to a sad, well-aged Scottish air, *Auld Lang Syne*.

*And thair's a hand, my trusty friend,  
And gie's a cup o' thine;  
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne.*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,  
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne.*

*For auld lang syne.*

We can only hope and go on.



## LETTERS

### ■ Don't allow tragedy to happen again

My nephew, Kevin Perry was written about in your paper on Dec. 9, 2001.

He was killed by a drunk driver. My brother, Jeff Perry was killed by a drunk driver in 1989. My brother, Jim Perry, Kevin's father, has been walking with a limp for years because of a drunk driver.

Why? Why does this keep happening? Why haven't people learned?

Kevin was killed just 6 days shy of his 40th birthday. My brother Jeff was just 34. Two young lives gone because someone chose to drive after drinking.

I look at Kevin's 4 young children, Tony 19, Ashleigh 16, Kevin II, 7 and Vinny 5 and my heart just breaks.

How will these children adjust to their loss? They adored their Dad. Every where you look at the funeral home you see the love that their children have for their Dad. They placed pictures up and lined his casket with mementos and letters to him. His two youngest children, given him for his birthday, I look at Kevin's 4 young children, Tony 19, Ashleigh 16, Kevin II, 7 and Vinny 5 and my heart just breaks.

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