

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 their 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 SOCC 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 SOCC 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 yes, redistricting!

The once-a-decade process of redrawing legislative district boundaries according to 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's redrawing 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 politicians 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 politicians' 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 balloting 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 "Afghanism" 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, kalishnikovs 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 unharmed 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 Bobbie Burns set to a sad, well-aged Scottish air, *Auld Lang Syne*.

*And there's a hand, my trusty friend,
And there's a hand o' thine;
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.
For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
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 15, Kevin 11, 7 and Vinny 6 and my heart just breaks. How will these children adjust to their loss? They adored their Dad. Everywhere you looked at the funeral home you saw the love these children have for their Dad. They placed posters up and filled his casket with mementos and letters to him. His two youngest children giving their Dad the Christmas gifts they had gotten for him and placing them in his casket. His brother Danny breaking down in huge sobs, his grief too much to bear. His older children with tear stained faces and the younger two unsure of what this all means.

It was a sight I couldn't bear to see but I had to. My nephew has been killed by a drunk driver. Kevin's parents and siblings faced the horrific task of burying their son and brother.

All I can do is ask your readers to please not let a tragedy like this strike again. Please don't drive if you have been drinking. Please don't let your party guests drive after drinking. Be responsible and think before you touch your keys. The loss of a human life and the tremendous grief that the family must endure is not worth it.

Please don't let this tragedy happen to another family or to your own loved ones. I didn't think it could happen once to my family, but it did, and then it happened again.

Kathie Perry
Livonia

■ School vigilance

The latest national educational reform requires proficiency testing to validate student knowledge. Many states already require students to pass proficiency tests to graduate from high school. Many high schools in the other states have added the passing of proficiency tests as a high school graduation requirement.

Farmington has a dismal record with proficiency tests. Results are publicly underreported and both formal and informal district communication attempt to diminish the legitimacy of proficiency tests. Poor performance is often neither mediated with the student nor effectively responded to by the district to prevent recurrence.

Parents who care about the substance of a Farmington education must be vigilant of the instruction that takes place in the classroom with the implementation of proficiency tests. Over 30 years of research has validated that solid instruction in the basics followed by student-centered, activity-based instruction is the most productive and reliable means of developing skills in all students.

We are at risk that Farmington will

follow in the steps of the New York Public Education System. In response to the State's implementation of proficiency testing similar to the Federal legislation, rather than rely on and implement research-based instruction, there is a self-destructive retreat to teaching to the test.

Due to a lack of standards, inadequate supervision, and a lack of accountability, teaching to the test will be an improvement for many students. But from the perspective of all students, it is an irresponsible and wholly inadequate response.

Taxpayers, too, must be vigilant. Accountability to you is a shared responsibility between teacher, parent and student. The passing of proficiency tests is a natural by-product of research-based instruction. When it doesn't happen, one or more parties have reneged at being accountable. That should be unacceptable to you. You need to respond.

David L. York
Farmington Hills

■ Letter misinformed

I read with interest the *Saving money 101* letter last week and couldn't help but respond to the misinformation.

Farmington has not provided MESSA health benefits to employees since 1995, as Ms. Alspach claims. Since 1995, Farmington Schools has been saving money on its health costs with a self-funded program administered through a third party.

The benefits and service have remained the same, and savings have accrued to the tune of \$2.86 million. Also in 2000, the district self-funded its dental program and saved \$225,000 in the first year.

In 1998, the district embarked on a custodial study with the union, reducing costs and positions and improving services through a time study. Implementation of the study recommendations has saved more than \$550,000 annually.

The Nutrition Services program has been self-supporting since 1998. And in 1997, the district resumed transportation of its out-of-district special education students to save money and improve service over a contractor.

Proposal A tied the district's funding to the state's economy. So it's no surprise that next year's budget will be tenuous. I am sure Farmington Schools will continue its tradition of improving efficiencies and looking for ways to save money before student programs are affected.

Len Brans
Farmington Schools Financial
Strategies Committee

■ Judgment day

I have read the letters printed in recent issues of the Observer by Ms. Carol Lucas concerning her religious beliefs, and while my first reaction was to dismiss them as fanatical rants, after some consideration I feel compelled to toss in my two cents worth.

The reason for this is that I believe it is exactly the kind of attitude held by Ms. Lucas and those of her ilk that lie at the root of much of the world's problems, including the mess we are dealing with currently. History is chock full of examples of the horrific consequences that are a direct result of the actions of narrow-minded, bigoted

and intolerant people and those who support them.

The Crusades come to mind, for instance. Fueled by the kind of religious xenophobia that Ms. Lucas propagates, untold thousands were cruelly and unmercifully tortured and even killed for not believing in the "right" God.

Presently, Osama bin Laden and other militant extremists attack those who do not worship or live in the manner they believe is divinely prescribed. The violence in the Middle East is absolutely based upon conflicting religious beliefs.

Across the spectrum of the world's religions, most hold the opinion that anything different than what is taught to their faithful is derivative of the Devil or some other sinister force, and in the interest of self-preservation encourage, either overtly or tacitly, the destruction of these dissenting entities. The "truth", it seems, comes in a variety of flavors.

Those who condemn others to a fiery Hell for believing differently than they do ignore some of the Bible's most important passages. To paraphrase: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" and "Judge not, lest ye be judged also." But these folks like to pick and choose the most self-serving portions of the Good Book, and disregard the ones that fly in the face of their staunchly held views.

I believe that, if there is to be a Judgment Day where all are held accountable for their actions and words, these people who spew hate and bigotry are in for the shock of their lives. Ms. Lucas is certainly entitled to her opinions, and I will fully defend her right to express them. It seems, however, that our political and social systems are being hijacked by people like her and the demagogues that pander to them, and we all suffer as a result.

These people would best honor and serve God and the world in general if they would look inward and concentrate on being the best they can personally. The world would be a much better place, and all of God's children could live in peace.

Scott Stevenson
Farmington

Share your opinions

We welcome your letters to the editor. Please include your name, address and phone number for verification. We ask that your letters be 400 words or less. We may edit for clarity, space and content.

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