

Farmington Observer

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Prospects dim for future of C'ville community ed

In concept, community education is a great idea: It expands education and learning across a school district from only focusing on children between the ages of kindergarten and high school to a much wider audience.

However, districts facing community education programs that are pulling money away from K-12 programs and aren't serving residents of the community - which is the situation facing Clarencville - must step back and reevaluate.

By setting up a task force to study its community education programs, school district officials in that small district, which covers parts of Livonia, Farmington Hills and Redford, took the first step.

Now that the group has reported and recommended changes comes the toughest part.

Several board members have already made up their minds. Trustees Bryan Bentley and Gary Garrison voted against continuing community education programs in Clarencville last week; after seeing the writing on the wall: Barely more than a quarter of the community education classes are taken by residents; in addition, it's costing the district \$20,000 a year to subsidize community education programs.

It has become customary for school districts to espouse the idea of life-long learning, aiming to serve its residents from nearly the cradle to the grave. It's a standard of district mission statements.

One key component of the theory is that a school district should serve all of its residents, not only those pupils in the K-12 grades. Community education has generally found a niche in offering residents a chance to learn things like crafts, home remodeling, yoga, finances, swimming, music and more at a price that's less expensive than college courses -

often as a step to gauge further interest or as a way for someone to keep active.

However, Proposal A has left many districts without as much practical need for community ed; that is, if residents aren't needed to vote for millage renewals and increases as they had been under the state's previous school funding process, keeping people without kids in school connected to, invested in and enamored of the local school district doesn't necessarily bring the financial payback it once did.

Facing the major difficulties of unprofitable programs and service that isn't greatly benefiting the district's residents seems like a one-two knockout punch to community education in Clarencville. Couple that with the closing of the district's swimming pool, which is eliminating a big chunk of these community ed programs in the district, and it seems that Bentley and Garrison couldn't be faulted for throwing in the towel.

Board members who didn't join them offered a variety of reasons. One wanted to see better advertising. Another supported keeping community education based on the district's philosophy of life-long learning. Another wanted to see the school administration's reaction to the study report's recommendations.

Dropping something as valuable as community education should not be something taken lightly, especially since starting it back up again would seem near impossible especially in the current funding climate. Still, school administrators must take a long, hard look at whether the benefits are outweighed by the costs, especially as they will be felt in a school district the size of Clarencville. Right now the prospects seem dim without a major overhaul to the very least make the program self supportive.

Legislature should take a new look at tech bill

It's funny how issues fall in and out of favor in Lansing. Take technology. Gov. John Engler has been making appearances across Michigan this winter pushing his MI HiSpeed Internet Plan. Engler is encouraging legislators to make the process for expanded broadband Internet availability easier through a uniform permit and fee system for rights-of-way.

Although some questions remain about the proposal, it's apparently on the fast-track to becoming law and part of Engler's legacy as he leaves office next January.

Yet, another piece of consumer-oriented, technology-centered legislation has languished in the state House for nearly three years. We refer to HB 4406, which was not gathering dust in the Insurance and Financial Services Committee, could help pave the way for residents and small businesses to connect with their local government in much the same way they use Amazon.com. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Mickey Mortimer (R-Horton), would allow municipal governments to legally accept electronic signatures over the Internet for such things as dog licenses and building permits.

It is similar to a law already on Michigan's books - The Uniform Electronic Transactions Act of 2000. That law gives legal standing to electronic signatures for a wide range of private transactions (wills and real estate deals are the two major exceptions) when all parties agree in advance. But it stops short of allowing the state or local governments the same privilege.

The Observer believes the time is right bring HB 4406 to the floor and make the virtual township or city hall a reality.

In a series of stories Sunday, the Observer reported how municipal governments in western Wayne and Oakland counties have moved to a second generation of on-line presence.

Official Web sites that once offered photos of elected officials and city motives - but not much else - now provide a flood of useful information and interactivity for users. It's not uncommon to find zoning maps, events calendars, property tax data bases and calculators, dozens of printable forms or permit applications and e-mail contact with every municipal department - even updates of recreation league basketball standings on your city

or township Web site.

We agree with local Web site administrators - many who have other municipal government experience. They say allowing residents and businesses to send in routine permits and applications online makes perfect sense, even though some may be slow to adapt to the new technology. For one thing, it would turn local government into a 24/7 operation on a limited basis. That's certainly a solid use of tax dollars and a convenience for people whose work schedules don't offer a lot of flexibility.

It's not like the change will occur overnight. Many municipalities will have to purchase additional software or form business alliances in order to accept credit card payments for collecting fees from residents. Questions must also be resolved about how to handle the higher costs associated with credit card payments.

And we suspect all municipalities will want to hang on to some form of traditional permit application process and availability for people uncomfortable with new technology, which makes total sense.

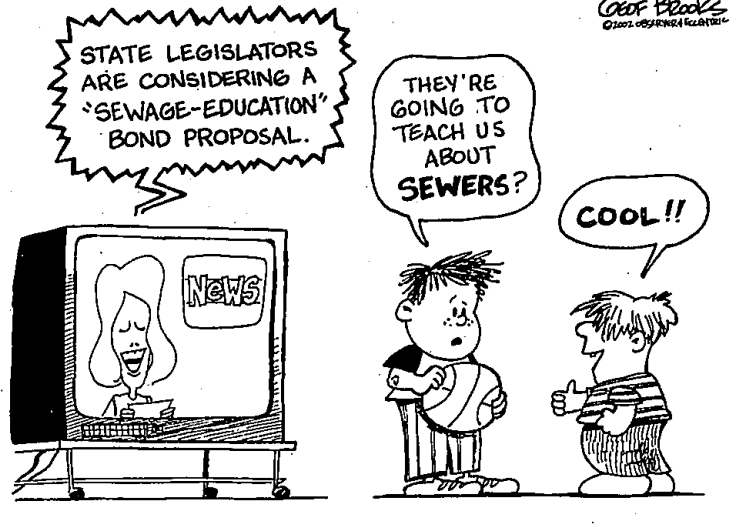
The fact is, though, that similar legislation is on the agenda in states from New York to California. The New Jersey Secretary of State has accepted electronic signatures for drivers license renewals since 1999. In Nevada, most routine transactions between residents and their state and local governments allow electronic signatures.

Michigan residents can renew car, boat and snowmobile registrations online with no signature required.

We're not sure why the governor's broadband Internet proposal gets the royal treatment while HB 4406 remains in limbo. Perhaps its because big business - telecommunications and cable companies - stand to benefit from the former but not necessarily the latter.

The Observer has gone on record as supporting the plan as a way to better serve Michigan residents. But we also know that municipal Web sites are looked at as necessities to providing good, responsive government by local officials. These days, they're in the same category as public safety and trash collection.

The Michigan Legislature and Gov. Engler need to heed that call as well.



LETTERS

Airport services gone

Smith/Davey Terminal once was convenient, but now the parking lot across from baggage pick-up is off-limits and "No stopping, Standing, or Parking" signs replaced meters at the curb.

I drove around the airport 30 minutes while my wife met our grand daughter and collected her second bag, no longer allowed in overhead storage.

Detroit's new midfield terminal will feature services capable of handling 60,000 visitors at one time. These concessions were signed when families spent time and money together while waiting for flights. Now, passengers go alone through security to the gate.

Returning, they hurry to the baggage area to reunite with family and friends.

If security won't let visitors accompany passengers throughout the terminal, these services will be more victims of 9/11.

Hank Borgman
Farmington

Editorial missed mark

As the saga of Eleven Pines continues to unfold, I thought it was ironic that the Farmington Observer, in an Editorial which commended community activists for "holding Council's feet to the fire", never opined on why citizens had to organize and demand our city council do the right thing, and come up with a plan which was a huge improvement from the outrage that the Farmington Hills City Council first proposed.

The irony seems to have sailed right over Observer Editor Joni Hubred's head. Another question should have been whose best interests were the council protecting? From the reaction of hundreds of local residents, many believed council was protecting insiders to the detriment of residents.

It was especially surprising since the Editor, Ms. Hubred, a newcomer to the city and not a property owner herself, would have the brass to tell resident homeowners what was in their best interests. Ms. Hubred crossed the line, in my opinion from objective reporting to cheerleading for local government.

Dr. Ken Massey is owed a huge debt of gratitude by the community for his tireless efforts to work a deal which was initially a disaster in the making, into something which people will be able to live with. Thank G-D it was an election year and council members were fearful of a voter backlash if they ignored resident's concerns.

Now that Eleven Pines has been shoved down citizen's throats by the City Council and City Manager, it is revealed to the community that they are short of funds to develop the property. Considering the lies I was personally told by certain city council members regarding the Eleven Pines project, it comes as no surprise.

The denial by Steve Brock, Nancy Bates et al that they knew the identities of the sellers, when asked during a televised council meeting by this writer, demonstrates either appalling incompetence, fraud and deceit or maybe all of the above.

Mr. Ludwig, the Farmington Hills City Council's most beloved developer was quite correct when he said "Eleven Pines was a labor of love." The labor of our tax dollars will finance the Council's love for Mr. Ludwig. It is amusing to watch council when Mr. Ludwig goes to speak, as they perk to atten-

tion like seals about to be fed.

As a community my friends, we have been had. Expect a millage increase in the near future to pay for the huge cost over runs which will surely materialize from the infamous Eleven Pines Development.

Ron Oliverio
Farmington Hills

Town Hall surprises

After attending (Thursday) evening's Town Hall Meeting regarding earlier start times for high school students, I would like to thank the volunteer members of the committee for their hard work and diligence in researching all sides of the question.

As a supporter of the issue, I was surprised to be in the minority at the meeting. Since I first heard about the concept of earlier start times for the high school, I have been in favor of it; not just because of high school kids needing more sleep, but also as a working parent who likes the idea of my child having less time at home alone after school.

It just makes sense to have the younger kids, who get to bed earlier, start school later. If the trade-off is laying off teachers and a larger deficit, then we must find ways to overcome these problems.

In fact, this change might actually result in higher enrollment rates. Both West Bloomfield (a district that is implementing later start times) and Farmington are excellent school districts, but given a choice, I think most parents of young children looking to the future would choose a district with later high school start times.

Bill Trapp
Farmington Hills

More fair play needed

The Farmington Public School's move to Oakland Athletics Association is certainly a step in the right direction for all our student athletes. I commend our coaches, parents and athletic department for supporting this change, which was long overdue.

But the move to OAA is only one step to accomplishing a "level playing field" for all high school sports in our community. An important step must also be taken to eliminate improper recruiting of players from other teams or "home school" areas, and from other communities as well. This is called "undue influence" in the rules from the Michigan High School Athletic Association.

Recently, I learned many parents and students do not or did not realize what the rule of "undue influence" actually is. I assert that we must get this information out to the families while their students are in late elementary grades and middle school. Also, the junior league football programs, which include the Rockets and Vikings, must be alerted to this rule. Over the past few years, one-third to one-half of Harrison's starting line-up consisted of students who should have been at NFHS or FHS or were "transfers" from other communities or states! In some instances, the football players even started school at North or Farmington, or at other high schools, and then transferred to play at Harrison. This certainly has a negative impact on the high schools that the players left from.

What does this teach our children

when a high school team "stacks its roster" with players? Where is the student's sense of loyalty to their home school, to their friends and neighbors that they've grown up with? I commend those students who have chosen to stay together by attending their home high school. Most of the Power Middle School football players came to FHS the last two years to experience much success, including the District championship, as a freshman team growing and learning together.

There are questions that have surrounded Harrison's football program for many years. How many parents, fans, students and media affiliates have questioned how one high school in our community could come up with so many talented players year after year? And where do all these players come from? How many players were transfers from other cities or states? Do these transfer players actually move into Farmington or Farmington Hills with their parent, or with another guardian in order to play football? Has all of this "recruiting" been done according to MHSAA rules?

Who would like to join me in demanding answers to these questions? I feel strongly that our parents, students and community members deserve answers. Since the 9-11 attack, I believe that more of us need to stand up for our beliefs, and to protect the integrity of our athletic programs in the Farmington public school system!

Last April, a letter containing many parents' and students' names was sent to our Athletic Director Mr. Swinehart regarding this issue. But nothing was thoroughly investigated or resolved. Many of the named parents were never called. Now, I have contacted MHSAA about this problem.

If anyone has been affected by this "undue influence" please come forward by writing to the editor or to our athletic director, Mr. Swinehart. Our administration needs to hear from everyone affected.

Every student athlete deserves a fair chance to play on a successful team!

Denise Albrecht
Farmington Hills

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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