

Attorneys defend method of appointment

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER
sbuck@os.hometown.com

Two attorneys gave their perspective of the law and the Open Meetings Act prior to the appointment of new Farmington Councilman Michael Harrison.

One was John Donohue who has represented the city for years. The other was Mayor Jim Mitchell who also is a lawyer.

An appointment was necessary because Councilman Bill Hartsock resigned after more than 28 years of service.

In a controversial decision — not made publicly — council members agreed to interview candidates separately and not in an open forum. Mitchell explained that council members have "tried to keep it very private."

The city charter was silent about procedure, Mitchell said. Donohue directly and indirectly mentioned press coverage which criticized the selection process. He criticized "the slant"

by local newspapers to the council acting as if it were a "private club."

"People need to know that the process being followed is in accordance with the law," Donohue said. "From my point of view, we have done our homework and we have advised this council in accordance of the law. The suggestion is that everything this council does should be done in public. The spirit of the Open Meetings Act is just that. When council acts it must act in public. But, each individual council member does not constitute the council."

The Open Meetings Act applies to meetings, the convening of a public body in which a quorum is present, for the purpose of deliberating toward or rendering a decision about public policy. "The public is entitled to complete access to that process," Donohue said. "An individual citizen who chooses to speak to a council member about something which is on their mind has every

right to do so without that matter being made public. If council chooses, in conformance with the Open Meetings Act, to discuss applicants for position on council in private with that individual they are totally and completely free to do so. To deny that opportunity would be in violation of the Constitution of the United States."

As long as council members don't talk with each other about their deliberations, there is no violation of the Open Meetings Act. Each council member received a copy of Donohue's opinion.

"The process which was followed is not the only process," Donohue said. The process chosen opens it up for the timid as well as the bold, to the hesitant candidate as well as one who is more sure.

"People may hesitate to apply for public office because their name may become public," Donohue said. "Their neighbor may know they failed to get appoint-

ed. Their business competitor may know they failed."

He credited the council for its sensitivity and for giving people the comfort level of not going public. "Other clients to the north, west and east would have chosen a different point of view, a different approach in keeping with the Open Meetings Act as well," Donohue said.

Mitchell said the process hasn't been easy. The charter requires an appointment of a new council member no more than 60 days after the position becomes vacant.

"The process has allowed us to protect the privacy of each candidate," Mitchell said.

The decision to run for office in November 2003 was up to the candidate.

"We understand that the people of Farmington expect us to act honorably to serve the best interest of the city," Mitchell said.

Council from page A1

Some candidates came out as top picks in the minds of individual council members.

They were: Suzanne Paul, who serves on the Farmington Downtown Development Authority; Harrison; Duane Reynolds, chairman of the Traffic and Safety Board; Gerald Wasen, chairman of the Farmington Employees Retirement System Board of Trustees; and Mark McConnell, chairman of the Zoning Board of Appeals.

"Those who are sitting up here tonight won't be council members forever," said Councilwoman Mary Bush. She encouraged all to stay active with the community and consider running for election in the future.

Council members' choices in no specific order were:

■ Bush — Paul, Harrison and Reynolds
■ Arnold Campbell — Wasen and Harrison

"The key thing I'm interested in is a candidate is the ability to represent Farmington in a positive way," Campbell said. "The job requires professionalism and contribution."

■ McShane — McConnell and Wasen

"I asked each candidate which assets they brought to the position," McShane. "Only the best applied for this."

■ Mitchell — Harrison and McConnell.

Harrison from page A1

Harrison sat down with Hartsock to gain his perspective.

Harrison, 55, is a marketing and promotional products consultant for his company Michael Harrison, Inc. of Farmington Hills. His company offers direct sales and business promotional products, advertising specialties, gifts and incentives. Clients include companies like Verizon, Beaumont Hospital, and Mercy Health services.

"I've been self-employed for 30 years," Harrison said. Consequently, he said his interviews for council were the closest thing he's had in terms of a job interview in years. Harrison worked as an independent contractor for A.J. Phillips Advertising in Livonia from 1990-1993; Discovery Group in Livonia, 1984-1990; and for Harrison Enterprises, a family company in Farmington Hills.

Family life

A Farmington resident since 1991, Harrison and wife Joan live on Warner in a bungalow located in the historic district.

Joan is a human resources generalist at Botsford Hospital. They have two children, Jeff and Colleen, and two granddaughters, Elyse and Rachel. Their home was built by the late Emily Butterfield, the first female architect in Michigan. Harrison has been chairman of

the Farmington Historical Commission since 1998.

Harrison said he was solicited to apply for the council position but won't say by whom. "When I was first solicited, the first thing I did was ask Frank Laubert for a copy of the city charter. It's very open-ended. The fact that they chose to have meetings with each individual but not with each other put more of a burden on them than the candidate. They know when they chose these people they would have to stick to their guns no matter how much they were questioned by the press or by citizens. If they were to maintain the integrity of the process, they had to stick with it straight through."

Harrison said he had no idea who the other candidates were. "There was no indication in my mind that this was a done deal," Harrison said. "I was sure they would make a decision they were comfortable with."

Interviews with council members were different. "Each fit their own personality," Harrison said. "It was interesting to see how each one pursued their interview."

He didn't know if it would have been any more constructive or of any benefit to allow the public to comment on the candi-

dates. He saw Monday's meeting to name a councilman as a private meeting in a public forum. "If it turns into a popularity contest then they would just as well have had an election to start with. Choosing what they did was more appropriate."

Harrison agreed he will have an advantage if he runs for office. "There's not a whole lot of people trying to unseat council," he said.

Traits listed on his resume: skilled networker, experienced marketing consultant, consensus builder, skilled organizer, creative problem solver and dedicated to the Farmington community. Establishing a theme is important because the Downtown Development Authority plans to reapply for the Main Street technical assistance grant. They were turned down last year. The DDA will also fill Judy Downey's position. She retires at the end of next year.

'Great place to live'

"Everyone who lives in Farmington is convinced it's a great place to live but I think they need to do a better job of getting the word out to the metropolitan area," Harrison said. "Farmington lacks a real theme of who we are and what we are about."

The first order of business for Harrison is the April 30 budget session. "I will get my arms around numbers I have not known except as a taxpayer," Harrison said.

Harrison attended St. Thomas University, in St. Paul, Minn., 1965-1968 and the University of Minnesota in 1969. He graduated from Detroit Catholic Central in 1965 and attended Our Lady of Sorrows Grade School.

He's a charter member of the Governor Warner Mansion Development Committee and co-author of the mansion's mission statement and volunteer marketing/development consultant for the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan. He's been a board member of the Farmington Exchange Club in 2001; held numerous offices/committee assignments for the Farmington YMCA Board of Directors, 1978-2001; served on the Metropolitan Marketing Committee of the YMCA of Metropolitan Detroit, 1984-1996; was on the administration committee considered the parish council of Our Lady of Sorrows Church, 1988-1991; was president of the Wooddale Elementary School P.T.O., 1978-1980 and president of Specialty Advertising Association of Michigan, 1974-1976.



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