

Two things that need fixing in our elections

Most of the time most folks usually don't pay much attention to politics or elections. But if people are ever going to pay attention, they'll be doing it just now with Election Day just two weeks off. And so maybe this plea will not fall on deaf ears.

We badly need to fix two continuing absurdities in our politics: Electing justices of the Michigan Supreme Court and voting for statewide education candidates on the November ballot.

In the first place, I see little hope in electing justices of our Supreme Court. Over the years, a tiny minority of lawyers, nobody casting a ballot has any idea about who the candidates are, their qualifications, their views on jurisprudence and so forth. Incumbents just always get re-elected; after all, they're designated as justices on the ballot, conclusive proof that the only thing that counts for the voters is the incumbency label.

Political pros (and polls regularly published in Inside Michigan Politics, the newsletter bible of political junkies) say that people overwhelmingly want to hang on to their right to elect Supreme Court judges in ignorance because they don't trust the politicians to make good appointments. OK. Realistically, I doubt that will ever change.

But allowing campaigns for our highest court to be funded privately is a continuing scandal. Consider these facts, as documented in a careful survey compiled by the Michigan Campaign Finance Network:

- Campaigns are becoming very expensive. Since 1994, the average amount raised by successful Supreme Court candidates has quadrupled from \$286,000 to \$1.9 million in 2000. You can bet your bippy that Joe Six-Pack isn't coming up with that kind of dough.

- Worse, people appearing before the Supreme Court often have contributed to the campaigns of the same judges who hear the cases. Between 1990 and 1999, an amazing 86 percent of cases heard by the Court involved a litigant or a lawyer who made a contribution to one or more of the justices hearing their case. Somehow, I can't recall a justice ever excusing him or herself from a case because of a conflict caused by a campaign contribution.

- Worst, special interests are pouring millions of dollars into TV advertising in judicial campaigns, usually claiming that one candidate or another is nothing more than a bum. In 2000, more than \$6.8 million went into such "issue" advertising, the net effect of which was to cheapen the public's opinion of our jus-

tices and in the integrity of the Supreme Court.

Alfred P. Carlton Jr., president of the American Bar Association, got it right: "Special interests are pouring millions of dollars into judicial campaigns because they want judges to serve their interests, not the public interest. As more and more judges face skyrocketing campaign costs, more and more people believe justice is for sale. Public funding is one solution states can use to enhance public trust in our courts."

North Carolina just broke new ground in adopting the first system of public funding for candidates for their Court of Appeals and Supreme Court. Michigan should do the same.

As to voting for statewide education candidates — for University of Michigan Board of Regents, Michigan State University Trustees and Wayne State University Governors, and for the State Board of Education — consider how many of the candidates you actually know anything about. Zero, nada, nothing. Right? That's why there is a 35-50 percent drop-off in votes from governor to education candidates.

How come? Easy. The news media are entirely preoccupied with covering and opining on more important contests on the November ballot.

So they don't cover education races and only a few — the big Detroit papers and some Booth Newspapers, to their great credit — even bother to endorse. And, frankly, some people who really don't belong on the boards of our great state universities get nominated by the special interests that dominate both party conventions and get elected riding coattails at the top of the ticket.

A solution is easy: Go back to the system we had in Michigan before we adopted the new Constitution in 1963. In those days, statewide education offices were elected — along with school boards and local school taxes — in elections held in the spring of odd-numbered years.

This had the useful effect of converting spring elections into "education elections," when a wholesale debate over policy and funding for education had some chance of catching public attention. Michigan now spends more state money for K-12 schools and higher education than on any other category, making education an apt subject for statewide public debate. But without an "education election," we lack a vehicle to stimulate that needed debate.

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@hometown.net.

Help protect environment with lawn care products



Sheri Cohen

What about lawn care? What about clean water and air? How are they related? I've been studying the "choice" of chemically treating lawns for years now. Let me share with you:

What I've been doing is reading articles and talking to people about water and air and health. I've gone on two bus tours sponsored by Friends of the Rouge and learned a great deal. I'm learning about the impact of lawn chemicals and fertilizers on our water and air and bodies. I'm learning about the value of extending our gardens to include native plants and why they are valuable to us.

I'm learning how much of a difference there is in what we plant on our property, respective to what absorbs the least water (like grass) and the most (like trees).

I saw the beginnings of a native plant area in Greenfield Village (The Chabow Restoration) which will serve by example to educate those who visit it. I saw a native landscape education site planted by SOCCRA volunteers in Royal Oak.

I saw how Cranbrook is like a microcosm of what is happening to our whole area as a result of building and roads that take away land that once absorbed water and now the overwhelming amount of water needs to be dealt with differently.

I've read numerous articles from Physicians for Social Responsibility and Union for Concerned Scientists and from watershed hydrologists, fisheries, biologists, aquatic entomologists, plant ecologists, bioengineers, phytosociologists, micro-biologists, ecologists. And these doctors of science speak out about the inherent dangers of what our current lawn culture does to life forms.

Our ecosystem balancing is a lot to think about. It makes sense to all of these scientists and educators and physicians to keep as many pollutants out of the water as possible. The phosphorus and nitrogen run-off dramatically increase algae growth and other plant growth creating green slimy mats on the waters surface choking out life in the water — harming the fish and depleting the level of oxygen in the water.

I think that people are unaware of the run-off of fertilizers and pesticides. The rain and sprinklers carry it down the storm drains untreated to our source of drinking water. It's in the air we breathe.

There was a news show on TV showing a woman with an air intake opening leading to a filter in a backpack which she wore all day, and kids playing in the yards and streets all day. At the end of the day those filters were tested and found to be full of pesticides and fertilizers. It's

in the air. I used to take a walk and love the smell of fresh cut grass. Now I wonder what else I am breathing?

I was trained and conditioned to have a lush, green lawn and reminded to do so by the media. I used to chemically treat my lawn. All of the awareness scared me. I just couldn't put another chemical on my lawn. I'd like to have no lawn chemicals on everybody's lawn.

But, realistically, I don't think that it's going to happen. There's a huge industry out there and a lot of people make their living making chemicals, selling chemicals, and applying chemicals. So, at least if people would use lawn chemicals with slow release nitrogen, say no to little phosphorus, and not to little potash, it would help a lot.

Please expand your garden to include native plant species. Native plant species absorb more water with a large root structure, as do trees and they were here before European settlement — they evolved as self-sustaining, once established, they provide food, they stabilize soil, encourage infiltration of rainwater and absorb pollutants.

I am a concerned citizen. I know that we inherited lawn from England where it rains a lot. Here it's high maintenance. Those dandelions, we are taught, are villains and should be killed in a hurry before they spread. Well those came over here from the colonists as a food source. And the leaves are full of anti-oxidants, which are beneficial to our health. What are we thinking?

Milk thistle is the only place a butterfly (I think that it's the monarch) will lay its eggs. I was pulling it out as a weed. If I thought that I was helping to endanger a species — I never would have done that. Education is the key.


If you choose to use chemicals, please reduce the pesticide use as much as possible — biologically necessary insects are dying, too. Use a buffer zone at the water's edges. That means tall grasses, wildflowers, plants to keep those lawn chemicals and sediment from entering the tributaries, and that means ditches and every storm drain at the edge of lawns — those are waterfront also.

Protect our water, please. Realize that we are recycling our water. Make a conscious choice as to what goes on your spot of the earth in the short time that you control it.

Bring awareness to how each one of us affect our source of water and to act consciously from an informed perspective. We can be part of the solution.

I know that the city is working on ideas to inform the public and to educate us. I thank you for your contributions.

Sheri Cohen is a Farmington Hills resident.



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