

Should Schools Belong?

How Mary Shook Up SEMCOG

By TIM RICHARD

Mary Dumas' outburst was a little out of order and shook up a few people in the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, but other members of the school bloc congratulated her on getting to the heart of the issue.

Mrs. Dumas is a newly-elected Schoolcraft College trustee and, in the absence of Arch Vallier, was functioning as the community college's delegate to SEMCOG's annual meeting.

The issue: What role do school districts have in a six-county regional agency? Conversely, what's SEMCOG doing for Schoolcraft, other community colleges and schools in general?

The issue is critical at the moment because SEMCOG has been standing still in the membership department overall and has been losing school members, notably Farmington, Livonia and Plymouth in recent months. The Schoolcraft board will decide, probably tonight, whether to stay in or quit. The board is split. Mrs. Dumas' vote could be the deciding one.

AND SO at last month's SEMCOG annual meeting, the soft-eyed lady from Livonia interrupted the falling gavel to lace into the regional group's new chairman, Robert FitzPatrick, otherwise known as chairman of the Wayne County Board of Commissioners.

School officials aren't "selfish and short-sighted," she said, blistering FitzPatrick's remarks quoted in Observer Newspapers. "We're disillusioned and disappointed at our inability to participate in the whole planning process. Some of us in the school bloc don't even

"We're disillusioned and disappointed at our inability to participate in the whole planning process... But I'm willing to look at all sides of it."

—Mary Dumas



know what SEMCOG's services are."

Her outburst was brief, but it led to several polite confrontations between her and some of SEMCOG's staunchest friends. Whether they gave her satisfying answers will be known after the Schoolcraft board meeting tonight.

STEVEN WEISS, the staff man who handles SEMCOG's educational programs, said this was "one of the few councils of governments in the country with school district members." Both schools and the federal government, which insists on regional planning and provide much COG support, have difficulty seeing a role for schools, Weiss admitted, and SEMCOG itself has had no models to follow.

"Historically, some of the criticism has been valid, but now we're off the ground," Weiss went on, singing out a vocational education planning project.

He elaborated: "In the field of environmental technology, Wayne County Community College, Dearborn and Macomb community colleges all want to teach it. SEMCOG

but also felt that "school districts have neglected to get information" about SEMCOG.

Joe Mayfield, Taylor school board member and new chairman of SEMCOG's school bloc, agreed that schools were being shored but felt school districts were dead wrong on quitting.

"The schools are going about this in exactly the wrong direction. Other blocs may want the schools out of SEMCOG, and the counties will pick up their (schools') votes," said Mayfield.

"The counties are willing to pay the piper, so they'll call the tune," said Mayfield.

There were a dozen school people in the education bloc caucus, and after these exchanges there appeared to be a consensus: The schools are a weak bloc in SEMCOG, but rather than quit, they should participate more fully than ever, and should recruit other schools to join.

AFTER THE caucus, Mrs. Dumas met SEMCOG Chairman FitzPatrick, the

man who had originally aroused her ire, in the friendly atmosphere of a reception.

FitzPatrick guessed school members were quitting because of financial problems they all have, but he answered her question about what school delegates should do with a frank: "I don't know."

But he did know this: "The decisions we make in SEMCOG aren't going to affect us, but they are going to affect our children. Those decisions that will affect everyone in the region are going to be made whether some units of government are members or not."

"We want all 400 units of government in. But if we don't get enough members... well, the counties will fill the appointments on the executive board."

And on that note, Mrs. Dumas' first day as an acting delegate to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments ended.

Did they succeed in turning her around? She wouldn't say so, but she did allow as to how

she was "encouraged enough to consider" trying to keep Schoolcraft in: "I'm willing to look at all sides of it."

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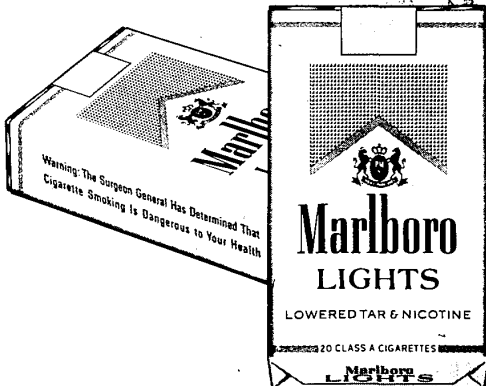
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