

Doing the right thing School board vote hits mark

A sharply divided Plymouth-Canton Board of Education could have taken the easy way out Tuesday. Instead, the board did the right thing and voted 4-3 to build the new high school on the western portion of district land near Joy and Beck roads — in effect creating a separate identity for the school, apart from the PCEP campus.

Trustees Judy Davis, Mark Slavens, Judy Mardigian and Darwin Watts deserve credit for sticking with the original plan and sticking by district voters who gave the go-ahead for the school by approving a \$79.8 million bond issue more than two years ago.

Too bad we can't say the same for short-sighted school administrators and the three trustees — Steve Guile, Roland Thomas and Elizabeth Givens — who supported an East site. While that may have been the more practical, cost-effective and easiest-to-implement decision, it represented a clear violation of the public trust.

The Observer believes the alternate East site was in the best interests of Plymouth-Canton teachers but not necessarily students; showed little long-term vision; and, perhaps most importantly, broke an ethical compact with parents that previous administrations had spent years nurturing.

The district isn't legally bound to build the high school on the west side of the site, facing Beck. But the promise of a new school apart from the campus was implicit in the 1997 bond campaign. Before that vote, school officials trotted out survey after survey showing residents' desire for a smaller, more manageable high school. A sign promoting the West site — which still stands — was a prominent visual reminder to district residents.

Some high school staff, who, it's fair to note, voiced concerns over the original site before the bond vote, have apparently used the two-year legal challenge over the ballot proposal as a wedge for these issues. Many have restated their positions in recent weeks.

Tuesday's vote came after a six-member committee made up of district teachers and administrators recommended the east site. The report said the east site would allow for a strong high school curriculum, maintain optimum teaching conditions and consistency on safety and discipline matters. It would also eliminate the cost of busing students between the campus and the new school, a trip of about one mile the way the roads are currently configured.

It wouldn't be a stretch, though, to call the committee's report self-serving. We don't doubt the East site would be less of a disruption for teachers and somewhat easier on the district budget. We question the wide-ranging estimates given for the cost of operating a school on the West site. Why have projected busing costs suddenly ballooned from \$20,000 to at least \$80,000? Is the projected additional annual operating cost for a West site of \$536,000 — some \$400,000 more than for an East site, accurate and where are those figures coming from?

And we wonder why parent involvement — courted so voraciously before the bond vote — was strangely absent from the committee.

A high school "campus," with students moving back and forth between buildings, may have worked in the 1970s. The Observer believes that's the wrong approach in today's educational climate. Plymouth-Canton educators should be pushing for ways to make high school a more intimate learning experience, something the majority of the board seems to understand. If that means abandoning the status quo and reaching out for innovative solutions, so be it.

Yes, money matters. Especially when its taxpayer dollars we're talking about. But so, too, does credibility. Sadly, some Plymouth-Canton administrators and three members of the school board used up most of theirs with Tuesday's vote.

Vouchers not a solution

A group called Kids First! Yes! is backing a ballot proposal for November, 2000, which would remove the Michigan Constitution's ban on indirect aid to private schools.

The group proposes allowing about \$3,100 to each student in districts where the dropout rate exceeds 33 percent (clearly aimed at Detroit).

On the face of it, this seems like an admirable attempt to allow parents more choice in their children's education, particularly in those public school districts that are failing to provide quality education.

But the proposal is getting some close and apparently negative scrutiny from Gov. John Engler, long a proponent of programs that allow more parental choice, including the publicly funded charter schools. Engler has let it be known that he has never supported vouchers and would be examining the proposal carefully before deciding on whether to support it.

Some argue that Engler's lack of support for the proposal is more political than philosophical. They argue that a "voucher" proposal on the Presidential ballot would draw out a larger Democratic vote, especially in the traditionally Democrat Detroit and its near suburbs.

The thinking is that a growing number of Detroit voters, disgusted by the condition of the city's schools and Catholic voters in the older suburbs who want to send their children to parochial schools, would turn out to support the voucher proposal, while also casting a vote for Al Gore or whoever the Democrats nominate for president.

In addition there is a strong anti-voucher group within the Democratic party who also might be drawn out to a lackluster presidential race just to vote against a voucher program.

Neither of these scenarios help the chances of Engler's man, George W. Bush, in the always unpredictable Michigan balloting.

That's interesting political gamesmanship and certainly the kind of thinking that has made the governor such a successful campaigner. But there are legitimate reasons for him to continue his opposition to vouchers and for those who traditionally vote Democrat to consider what vouchers might mean for the future of public education.

■ We need to spend our money and invest our public efforts into making the public schools in all of our communities the best that they can be. We support any efforts by Gov. Engler in that direction and urge him to continue his opposition to voucher systems.

These newspapers continue to oppose vouchers for private schools. One of the greatest strengths of this country is the public school system, as beleaguered as it is. We believe that a voucher system would take desperately needed money from the public schools. It would also allow public money to pay for schools that aren't subject to public scrutiny in terms of test scores and budgets.

In addition, the idea of "choice" is distorted. Public schools must accept all students. These private or parochial schools are actually the ones given the choice of which students to accept and which to reject. And, when it comes to the students who are the most costly to educate — whether it's handicapped children, those with multiple impairments, or even those who are in high school — guess what the choice will be?

Yes, the voucher system will provide a stipend that would help middle class parents send their children to private schools, but it will not provide enough money to help poor parents. Over time, the result would be that money would be drained from those public schools that are often the only option for many parents.

In addition, we believe, any public money used to support church-centered school instruction programs is a violation of the First Amendment's prohibition against the establishment of a religion.

We need to spend our money and invest our public efforts into making the public schools in all of our communities the best that they can be. We support any efforts by Gov. Engler in that direction and urge him to continue his opposition to voucher systems.

ARKIE HUDKINS



LETTERS

Opinions are to be shared: We welcome your ideas, that's why we offer this space for your opinions. We will help by editing for clarity. To assure authenticity we ask that you provide a contact telephone number and if mailing or faxing a letter, please sign it. Letters can be mailed to: Valerie Olander, Plymouth Editor, 794 South Main, Plymouth, MI 48170, faxed to Valerie at (734) 459-2700 or emailed to volander@oe.homecomm.net

Ticket brings back memories

Reading about the Matt Sikes incident rekindled my own anger over a similar incident that I went through about 11 years ago. I was a 21-year-old living on my own in Plymouth Hills Apartments on Mill Street, who set out one evening with a girlfriend to go dancing at a club in downtown Detroit.

Just as I reached the intersection of Lilley and Ann Arbor Road, I realized I had left something at my apartment that I needed to go back and get. So instead of turning left on Ann Arbor Road toward the expressway, I turned right toward Main Street so I could cut back to my apartment using the side streets. That was a big mistake. You see, it was one of those nights where the "overly-hyper towards teens" police decided to block off two lanes of traffic on Main Street (one north, one south). They had also blocked off the entrance to most of the side streets — and, of course, the one I wanted to take to get home. So I decided to turn left into Dairy-Go-Round (it was closed), turn around, and take Main back to Ann Arbor Road.

How criminally unthinkable an act! No sooner had I entered the Dairy-Go-Round parking lot than a police car came in the other entrance and blocked me in. The officer pointed out the "No Trespassing" signs posted in the parking lot. I explained my situation — to no avail. My girlfriend and I were both given \$210 tickets. Unbelievable. I fought the ticket in court and finally settled on a \$50 fine with no community service — but that took many court appearances that caused me to miss both work and school.

Since moving to Plymouth in 1986 at the age of 18, I have been pulled over for such ridiculous reasons such as "revving up and dropping back" while driving my new stick-shift Mustang! Now at the ripe old age of 32 and a 10-year tax paying homeowner, it sickens me to hear of teens still being mistreated by the police. If the kids are just hanging out, not doing anything obviously wrong — then leave them alone! If they're littering or yelling obscenities, then ticket them! And do the same thing to adults!

I have to also point out that now that I'm an "adult" member of the Plymouth communi-

ty, I can really see the difference in the way that police treat teens and adults. If an adult speeds down Main Street during the day that's OK. But God forbid a kid sits on a curb at night! It sickens me that this lop-sided injustice by the police has continued for so many years. Instead of fighting with the teens, the community and the police department need to have a positive attitude about the situation. After all, some businesses, like the Coffee Bean and Repeat the Beat, are actually doing well because of the heavy teen traffic in town.

My suggestion for a first step is to place a few parents or responsible young adults, in coordination and cooperation with the police department, into the teen traffic areas to help patrol the areas in a non-threatening way. After all, those teens being mistreated by the police today will soon grow up to be honest, hard-working adults whose taxes pay the salaries and votes determine the careers of those same police!

Lisa Molk-Brashear
 Plymouth

Be reasonable to Edison

Reimbursing Edison customers for financial damage suffered would open a grab bag of demands that would never stop. Spoiled food, burned-out appliances, hotel and restaurant bills would only be the beginning.

Detroit Edison is a utility provider. It must generate and distribute electricity at reasonable rates, obey never-ending regulations and return a profit to investors (including retirees with 401(k) plans).

Storms happen and wires come down. Buried wires are easily cut by digging. Hospitals, many businesses and homes have alternate generators, especially in areas of frequent power outages. Nature won't pay the bills, but perhaps an insurance company will. If Edison pays, it will be the end of reasonable utility rates.

Hank Borgman
 Farmington

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OUR MISSION: "Because we publish community newspapers, we think about community journalism in a fundamentally different way than our bigger competition. They consider themselves to be independent from the stories and communities they cover, swooping in to write the unusual or sensational and then dashing off to cover something else. We regard ourselves as both accurate journalists and as caring citizens of the communities where we work."

— Philip Power

POINTS OF VIEW

Legislator earns high marks for attendance

There were just a few items from the editor's wastebasket that were worth reviving before rushing out the door Friday for a week long vacation to no where in particular. (April's Switzerland adventure is still being paid off.)

For immediate release from the office of state Rep. Gerry Law, "Law earns perfect attendance honors." The three-term lawmaker seems to have taken lessons from Our Lady of Good Counsel's eighth grade graduate, Matthew Schmidt, who also had a perfect attendance record. The only difference is Matt waited eight years to receive his accolades. Gerry did it in a much shorter time period.

"During the first six months of busy schedules, committee meetings

and long sessions state Rep. Gerald H. Law didn't miss any session days, earning 100 percent attendance honors," the press release said. (It doesn't mention anything about last year's attendance record in which he had the dubious honor of missing more sessions than anyone else in the House.)

The press release continues: "I take my responsibilities as a lawmaker very seriously," said Law, R-Plymouth. "The Legislature's success depends on every member's participation."

And just when I thought the Andy Griffith/Mayberry theme song was no longer whistling through my head...

The letters and phone calls continue to pour in over the ongoing debacle



VALERIE OLANDER

of a teen being ticketed for sitting on the sidewalk and fined \$210 in various charges by 35th District Court Judge Ron Lowe. One tidbit never made ink that merits a mention:

When a court clerk was handed the ticket of "obstructing the sidewalk" it was keyed into the computer system

as a charge that was punishable by "2 points." Judge Ron Lowe admitted that he'd never seen such a charge before and apparently neither did the clerk who thought the 15-year-old – now 16-year-old – Matt Sykes was a motorist charged with a traffic violation.

City Commission candidate Sean FitzGerald has told us one of his goals if elected is to consider revising the city charter which pre-dates the state Constitution. Maybe a few ordinances could be revised as well so that the city doesn't violate the "people's right to peacefully assemble."

Rumor has it there's also a law on the books that claims you can't herd cattle down the middle of the street. We can only hope Fred Hill doesn't

add Guernsey's to next year's Good Morning USA Fourth of July parade.

And finally, "Pet photographer marks 10 year anniversary," was another press release buried on my desk enmassed in some government-gobbly-gook-type papers.

That would be 70 years for some four-legged customers of Jill Andra Young Photography at 825 Penniman. Congratulations on a successful business!

Valerie Olander is editor of the Plymouth Observer. She also has obeyed the speed limit on Main Street since claiming in an editorial that a police officer "reached into the bowels of city ordinances" to ticket four teens for sitting on the sidewalk.

Boost mental health care to prevent more Columbines

GUEST COLUMNIST



VIRGIL BERNERO

always, unfortunately, the honest answer is "yes." No community in America is immune to the pervasive culture of violence that surrounds and enraptures too many of our young people.

If anything good can come out of such a terrible incident, it is the recommitment by all of us to making our schools and communities safe for our young people and preventing such

In the wake of the tragedy at Littleton's Columbine High School, students, parents and community leaders from around the country are asking, "Could it happen here?"

And almost

tragedies in the future. We may even re-examine our society's fascination and glorification of violence in popular media.

But the bulk of proposals spilling out from Washington and state capitols across the country so far address issues like dress codes, security guards and metal detectors. The majority of proposals are well intended, if ineffectual. Elements of many of the ideas could indeed prove helpful. But even a community police officer in the school is only as effective as the follow-up services available (there was a security guard on duty at Columbine High School).

Our young people today are under pressure. And so are our school systems. We ask our public schools to do much more than teach, and they try to deliver. Every educator knows that the problems of society do not stop at the school house door; they often bubble up to the surface in school, and may explode. It is time for policymakers

to face this reality and provide our schools the resources to deal effectively with vulnerable and at-risk children.

Educators can point out children most obviously in need of special attention – counseling or specialized educational or mental health treatment. But rarely is the mechanism in place to assure proper care and follow up for that student. Many educators are overwhelmed by the increasingly severe behavior and other problems children bring with them to school. They simply cannot address all the needs of today's diverse and sometimes troubled student body.

In the last 10 years, the state of Michigan has closed six of seven psychiatric treatment facilities for youngsters, leaving only Hawthorn Center in Northville, which is usually filled to its 112-bed capacity. Many children who would have received help at these hospitals can fill the gap. Private facilities generally release children as

soon as insurance coverage ends, usually one week or less, regardless of the need for continued care.

We are criminalizing children in need of mental health care just as we have the adult mental health system. Children who formerly received mental health treatment at the hands of trained professionals are now warehoused with little to no treatment in places like Oakland County's Children's Village or far worse facilities designed for criminals. What is happening is neither humane nor cost-effective. It is outrageous and unacceptable.

The tragedy at Columbine drives home the point that we must have greater collaboration and coordination – frankly a new, higher level of service from our community mental health agencies than ever before. It is not enough to provide service only to young people who are suicidal or homicidal at this moment. Local mental health agencies and state govern-

ment must step up to their obligations and not leave educators holding the ball. We ignore the needs of our children at our peril and theirs.

Most communities in Michigan and across the country have been fortunate to avoid a major tragedy thus far. The time is now to put in place a system of care that can assure assessment, counseling and effective treatment for every child in need. The school is the ideal setting around which to build such a system of care. If we continue to bury our collective head in the sand and deny needed mental health treatment we will needlessly imprison more and more youngsters and suffer more Columbines.

Virgil Bernero is executive director of the Michigan Association for Children with Emotional Disorders, a statewide United Way advocacy organization.

Communication works both ways: Tell us what you think

You've seen the commercial. A group of self-satisfied guys are sitting around and one of them says smugly, "It doesn't get any better than this."

I know how he feels.

This week I'm stepping into the position of managing editor for The Observer Newspapers. That means it's my job to help a talented group of editors, reporters, photographers and artists put out the best community newspapers in America.

For a newspaper junkie, it doesn't get any better than that.

For decades newspapers have been given the 8-count, only to rise again to fight another day. First it was radio, then television and then the Internet that would provide the KO. But each medium found its own purpose and its own audience. And newspapers did, too.

Community newspapers have prospered by providing the news that you need. Our front page has a slogan, "Putting you in touch with your world." We don't have far-flung correspondents, national political pundits or an extensive travel budget. We don't cover the hot Hollywood gossip.

We're about you, your neighbors, your local government, your schools. We want to tell your story.

That's an important job and we take it very seriously.

We're diligent about covering local elections, even when the electorate seems apathetic. We keep a close eye on local schools, both what the school board does and what actually goes on in the classrooms.

We cover the school sports, putting the spotlight on energetic young men and women athletes, rather than on millionaire professionals.

We also try to reflect the life that is important to you and your neighbors with profiles of the people who live and work in each of our communities.

We cover issues, controversies, organized activities that have a vital interest for the people living in each of our towns. If it matters to you, it matters to us.

We cover regional and state news that will have a direct impact on our communities.

When something important happens around the world, we won't be giving you the latest wire story, but we'll often find a local connection that brings the story home to you.

When we cover the arts, we'll tell you about



HUGH GALLAGHER

■ I became a newspaper junkie probably by osmosis, watching my father devour newspapers from front page to back. He always had strong opinions about everything and carried on a regular dialog while he read.

what you're interested in attending and also about what your friends and neighbors are doing to express themselves.

We also present our opinions on issues that directly affect your lives. You may not always agree with our opinions and that's fine. Our goal isn't primarily to change your view but instead to stimulate debate and, maybe, encourage you to participate in the discussion with a letter to the editor.

I became a newspaper junkie probably by osmosis, watching my father devour newspapers from front page to back. He always had strong opinions about everything and carried on a regular dialog while he read.

That's what we hope you'll do with your Observer. We want to know what you think about what you're reading, what you'd like to see in the paper, what we're doing wrong and what we're doing right. If you think you know a good story we should be covering, don't keep it to yourself; let us know. If we're missing the big picture on what's important in the community, fill us in. If our opinions on local issues are all wet, set us straight.

After all, it's YOUR newspaper.

You can reach me at (734) 953-2149, fax me at (734) 591-7279 or e-mail me at hgallagher@oe.homecomm.net.

I look forward to the discussion.

Hugh Gallagher is the managing editor of The Observer Newspapers.