



*Horton's*

# *Michigan Notebook*

## *Political & Social Commentary*

December 30, 2018

### **Approval of school bond issue was 'most important' local news story**

**By Steve Horton**

In the current issue, we've done a 'Year in Review,' taking a look back at some of the top news stories in the Fowlerville-Webberville area during 2018.

Of the various stories, the most important in my mind was the approval by voters of the \$17.5 million bond issue for capital improvements requested by the Fowlerville Board of Education.

School officials had already obtained a \$3.5 million Energy Conservation Bond that did not require voter approval, so the two sums of money meant that a lot of infrastructure improvements, along with needed renovations, upgrades, added amenities, and modernizing could be done to the buildings and grounds.

This also freed up money in the General Fund to provide staff with salary increases and to make investments in improving and enhancing classroom learning.

When all is said and done, the basics of "reading, writing, and arithmetic" still matter, but so, too, does providing training on computer skills and other cutting-edge technology. But it matters also that the

physical premises are kept in good order and appearance and the necessary learning devices and materials be on hand.

The Fowlerville Schools—to borrow that famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln's—is of the "community, by the community, and for the community."

Nothing else in the Fowlerville community, involves or touches as many local residents—whether it's the students and parents, the staff, those who attend athletic events or musical concerts, or others who provide some sort of service or product. Even for those who don't have or no longer have a direct connection to the day-to-day activities, the campus on the north side of town looms large. A continuum of past, present, and future.

I regard the passage of the bond issue as important for two reasons. One, without that money and what it can accomplish, the physical plant gradually deteriorates and the quality of what's offered suffers. For lack of a better description, it's pride of what you have and, thereby, who you are and what you aspire to be and become.

A crumbling parking lot with weeds growing in the crack says one thing, while a new coat of asphalt says another. A leaking roof sends one message, a new covering speaks of commitment. Put another way, the bond issue was an affirmation to the long view rather than the short-term expediencies.

The second reason is that it (in my view) was a vote-of-confidence in the school system. While everything might not be perfect (what is?) and while there is always grumblings and undertones of discontent, the stakeholders—those directly involved and others less so—indicated their willingness to invest their money in this cause; that cause being the education of our young people.

I remember all too well when bond issues got turned down back in the “good old days,” namely the 1970s, with the result that portable classrooms sprung up like a shanty town on the outskirts of the main buildings and students had split, half-day sessions.

The world didn’t end for the Fowlerville Community Schools, but it was hardly an ideal situation and the students back then didn’t get the full benefit that they would have with one, shared day of classes and extracurricular activities.

Like most bond issues, the ones put forth to voters had sought a new school building, but also renovations and enhancements to existing buildings and the improvements to the grounds and athletic fields.

Besides the above-mentioned consequences to those issues being rejected, the existing buildings were experiencing problems. One of the most telling was the roof leaking at Smith Elementary when it rained or snow melted.

I was a new reporter when, in 1977, the school board decided to ask voters for a maintenance millage. It sought three additional mills for three years, giving the district a financial shot-in-the-arm, followed by one mill for the next seven years to keep making improvements.

The then superintendent, Robert Hoffman, was leaving, so (with Bob Hoffman’s concurrence) I interviewed assistant superintendent Charles Brigham. We did a question-and-answer session that was printed in two successive issues, going over the

problems and needs, the planned improvements, and also the background of what had happened.

Chuck Brigham had been a high school teacher and coach before moving up the administrative ladder. He was regarded by many, myself included, as a man of honesty and integrity. When he said something, people listened and, more importantly, regarded it as accurate.

The upshot was that the millage passed, improvements were made, and within a couple of years the voters approved a bond issue for a new high school—the building that now houses the junior high.

Since then voters have oked a bond issue to build Kreeger Elementary and two separate and subsequent requests that resulted in the construction and then expansion of the current high school. We’re not the Taj Mahal, but the community has a beautiful school campus that we can be proud of.

I was concerned when the recent \$17.5 million proposal was announced last January because it was the first time since the Great Recession that school officials had made such a request.

“Would voters reject it?” I wondered. “Would the momentum that had begun with the passage of the 1977 maintenance millage now falter and would we instead see the gradual erosion of investment in local education?” I also wondered.

Happily, those concerns were alleviated. Granted, there are many challenges going forward in the goal of educating our local youth and what happens in the classroom determines the outcome. But I think that ‘pride in place’ and community support and shared commitment make those challenges easier to meet.