

letters



dsherman@beeneews.com  
www.beeneews.com

Signals should be longer to be safer

I am a retired police officer after serving 35 years with the Erie County Sheriff's Office, Patrol Division. What I saw more than 35 years is that the cycles of traffic signals got shorter and shorter. The idea apparently is to keep everyone happy by moving

a little traffic at a time instead of a wait.

Everyone is in a hurry these days, and drivers get frustrated when only a few cars go through the signal and then they may get stuck for two or more turns on the signals.

If the Department of Transportation wanted to make intersections safer, they should make  
*(Please turn to page six)*

Corrections

In last week's Amherst Bee, the article on the Williamsville Central School District should have read, "the district still needs the assessment information from the town." Also, the amount in the preliminary budget for students to compete in state competitions should have read \$178,000.

Costs to taxpayers of local assessment just continues to grow

Some random thoughts on a couple of items of local interest that recently made headlines:

Talk about getting whacked in the wallet. Erie County Comptroller Mark Poona's recent report on property tax assessment in Erie County was definitely an eye-opener.

The numbers don't lie when you look at Poloncarz's estimate that the annual cost to county taxpayers for local governments providing property assessments is \$6.5 million, a figure that doesn't even include employee fringe benefits.

Poloncarz's recommendation to County Executive Chris Collins and the 15 members of the County Legislature to potentially save millions of dollars is simple — cease the local assessment process and introduce a centralized system that would handle all property assessments throughout the county.

Significant savings is what we need to aim for. Poloncarz's report shined some light on the concept of introducing a new approach to how the local assessment process is conducted.

State officials in Albany are currently offering local and county governments an attractive range of financial incentives if a move to a countywide assessment program takes place.

I think the transition to a countywide assessment model could do exactly what Poloncarz says it will do, namely cause an eventual movement to regular reassessment to take place, which hopefully would result in the end of what can be considered as unfair and extremely large swings in property taxes as well as the possibility of the end of equalization rates across local towns, villages and school districts.

A copy of Poloncarz's report is available via Erie County's official Web site at www.erie.gov. The document is something that should be reviewed by all local elected officials as some sort of unity should be aimed for in the hopes of securing annual savings that Poloncarz says could be as high as \$3.9 million, which doesn't even include any of that state aid or those incentives that are on the table.

\* \* \*

I'd say the honeymoon is definitely over for City of Buffalo School Superintendent James Williams.

Some of the decisions Williams made related to the well-documented McKinley High School debacle and the School 67 sex abuse scandal can best be described as questionable.

His inability to lead and provide sound direction helped fan the flames regarding the unproven sex allegations involving a volunteer basketball coach and a student at McKinley. The obvious abuse of power by certain individuals at that school resulted in what I believe was the wrongful termination of a valuable volunteer that many female student-athletes of that school respected and admired and could actually define as a role model.

To think that a seven-week suspension of a student with aspirations to go to college in a school district that has an incredibly high drop-off rate was ordered and enforced by district administrators is both shocking and sickening.

The fallout from the School 67 situation also showed Williams' true colors when he spoke about his nonreceipt of a very important document that was sent to him by registered mail.

Are we really supposed to take that explanation and the corresponding statements that Williams has made seriously? Does Williams think this constant practice of blaming others for major blunders is acceptable?

Credit the media exposure and subsequent outrage from parents for helping to recognize that Williams' management philosophy is severely flawed. These two incidents show that, while Williams may be well known and respected for his work in the education field, his handling of administrative matters when it comes to properly identifying misconduct and enforcing district policies and procedures on a day-to-day basis is subpar at best.

Williams is doing one thing right. He's teaching students of his district a valuable lesson when it comes to key character virtues like accountability, honesty and respect.

*(Daniel Meyer is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers of Western New York. Comments on this column can be sent via e-mail to: meyersmusings@gmail.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)*



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- Trey Measer, Publisher/President, e-mail: tmeaser@BeeNews.com
- John J. Evans, Executive Vice President, e-mail: jevans@BeeNews.com
- David F. Sherman, Managing Editor, e-mail: dsherman@BeeNews.com
- Jessica Finch, Associate Editor, e-mail: jfinch@BeeNews.com
- Michael A. Measer, Circulation Manager, e-mail: mmeaser@BeeNews.com
- Mary Anne Cappon, Advertising Sales Director, e-mail: macappon@BeeNews.com
- Linda Crist, Advertising Manager, e-mail: lcrist@BeeNews.com
- Karl Scheithir, Production Manager, e-mail: karls@BeeNews.com

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Tax rates likely unchanged in upcoming Sweet Home budget

Each April, the Sweet Home School Board adopts the proposed budget for the next school year, which is voted on by the community one month later.

School budget adoption is one of the most demanding jobs a board faces. The choices are difficult, and in the end it boils down to maintaining a balance between protecting the core programs of a school district and respecting the impact of local property tax increases on the community.

The balance is a delicate one, requiring the board and administration to see the big picture, to have a vision for the future and to keep priorities straight.

Planning for the 2008-09 budget began shortly after last year's budget was approved. The process of planning and designing the budget is complex, and there are many opportunities for gathering additional data, obtaining feedback, and revising the numbers.

The Sweet Home Board spends dozens of hours analyzing budget figures, listening to reports on programs and asking questions about efficiency and effectiveness. Anxiety regarding the overall tax burden on residents weighs heavily in the deliberation process, as does concern over maintaining core academic and extracurricular programs. In the end, spirited debate frames the critical issues, and the board works cooperatively to render decisions.

The process works exactly as it should, with

elected representatives of the community making choices that will impact the entire community.

There were some significant challenges to face when crafting the budget. Increases in pension costs, health insurance and utilities made up the largest portion of the budget-to-budget spending increase. The state budget was not finalized at the time this column was written, but we are anticipating that some additional state aid will flow to Sweet Home, mitigating the increase in the overall tax levy.

Our governor and local state legislators, Sen. Mary Lou Rath and Assemblymen Jim Hayes and Robin Schimming, are proposing that STAR tax rebate checks should be between \$240 and \$275 for the average home in the district.

The numbers on the 2008-09 Sweet Home school budget reflect a fiscally responsible spending plan that meets the objective of protecting the core programs that define our school district.

The board approved a budget increase of \$2.2 million, which translates to a 3.79 percent increase over the current year's spending. By applying a conservative figure for increased state aid and assessment valuation, we estimate that tax rates will remain the same or decrease slightly, maintaining Sweet Home's status as the lowest full-value tax rate for Erie County homeowners.



GEOFFREY M. HICKS

Superintendent Sweet Home Schools