THE NEWS BEHIND THE NEWS

Waste, waste and more waste

The Maryland Department of Fiscal Services has finally admitted that more than a dozen state agencies and programs are duplicative and should be eliminated or consolidated by the 1978 General Assembly.

A report submitted by the department suggests eliminating the regional planning council and the board of trustees for state colleges and universities.

The council received more than $2.1 million last year, but the report said it duplicated programs provided by state, city and county planning departments.

The board of trustees spent $2.7 million in 1976 and the report said "the creation of the state board of higher education has altered the role of this agency."

The report also challenged allocations for:

— Office of Civil Defense, $251,243;

— Maryland Office of Economic Opportunity, $138,112;

— The Department of Economic and Community Development Seafood Marketing Program, $208,233;

— Maryland Agriculture Commission, $40,897;

— State Tobacco Warehouse, receives $18,758 in state funds but works primarily for the private sector and

— The publication "National Conservationist" of the Department of Natural Resources, $45,000.

One can wonder how much other money is being wasted by the state government on other programs such as these. Also, it may be interesting to find out what the state government decides about the department's finding. If it does nothing, then it too would have been another wasted project.

Talking to financial enemies

Economic genocide took a giant leap this week when the Maryland Public Service Commission approved a 1.8 percent rate increase for the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Co.

The increase will enable the telephone giant to raise about $4.6 million in revenues after taxes are paid.

The new rates mean customers with private unlimited dial service will have their monthly rates increased from $10.25 to $10.44 in the Baltimore area.

The cost of installing a telephone will be raised from $28 to $28.72.

This all means that those of us who barely afford to pay our phone bills will have to either decide to cut them off or sacrifice something else.

Buy an old building dirt cheap

The nation's first shopsteading program was announced this week by Mayor William Schaefer who said the plan is to do for businesses what homesteading does for homeowners.

Shopsteading will promote small business and increase the tax base by selling rundown city-owned buildings for $100 to persons who agree to turn them into shops, Schaefer said.

So far, 15 properties in slum neighborhoods have been sold and the new owners promise to open an ice cream parlor, a Mexican and Jamaican restaurant, a beauty salon, a real estate firm and other businesses.

Under the shopsteading program, the owners will be required to complete the renovations within two years after which they will receive title.

The owners will also be restricted to using the premises for the purpose they originally intended.

Who says smut is not beneficial?

The state Court of Appeals ruled Monday that the Maryland Obscenity Law is unconsitutional.

The state's highest court ruled by a 4-2 vote that the 1967 anti-smut law was invalid because it said that a clerk in a bookshop could be fined or imprisoned for selling pronography, but a movie projectionist was exempt from prosecution if the film was deemed pronographic.

The court majority held that no "rational distinction" can be made between the projectionist and the clerk and therefore the law deprives the clerk of the equal protection guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.

The pronography trade in Maryland will still be monitored by federal obscenity statutes that govern obscene material sent through the mails or distributed in interstate commerce.

Let them be their own bosses

In a move to take away even more authority from parents, a task force recently recommended that the federal government encourage the states to give youngsters birth control devices without parental consent.

A spokesman for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare said HEW Secretary Joseph Califano is considering the recommendation and has made no decision on it.

A memo issued by the task force says in part: "HEW should encourage state policies permitting adolescents to receive contraceptives without requiring parental advice.

"The adolescent must bear most of the risks and consequences of an unintended pregnancy and should be permitted to avoid the pregnancy."

According to the memo, more than 4 million females — as opposed to 7 million males — in the 15 to 19 age bracket are estimated to have had sexual intercourse and about 2 million use contraceptives.

Opponents of the memo argue that a parent's unique concern and responsibility for the child's health, and the medical costs of maintaining it, give that parent the right to know whether the child is using medical contraceptives.

Taxpayers may get some help

Two bills that are to be introduced during the 1978 session of the General Assembly could prove important to property taxpayers in the years to come.

Sen. Joseph Bonvegna, D-Baltimore, the sponsor of the bill, says his bills stand a chance of passing the 1978 legislature, but probably would be vetoed by Gov. Blair Lee.

The first bill would prohibit property tax assessment increases on a home until the owner sells or transfers the property.

The senator's second bill would give Baltimore control over its assessments, a power the city relinquished in 1973.

"The state is being criticized by the (city) council for the latest reassesments," he said. "I think we should just turn the whole thing back over to the city if it can do a better job."

It will be interesting to watch the senator's two bills and their progress in the general assembly this year.

The deals that are made here

Revelations were made this week regarding assessments that showed that the powerful are still doing favors for each other in Baltimore city.

State officials said that a 1975 assessment tax cut given to some Baltimore hotels and offices was too low. But city officials argued that the lower taxes were needed to keep businesses in the downtown area.

City assessor Louis Distefano had cut the Hecht Company's assessment of $1.3 million to about $650,000, Hutzler's $2 million assessment was reduced to $1.24 million, the Holiday Inn received an assessment cut from $4 million to $1.8 million, and IBM's Inner Harbor office was reassessed from $8 million to $7.2 million, according to state officials.

While thousands of city homeowners were appealing the higher reassessments of their homes in 1975, Distefano said the rising property taxes may force businesses out of the downtown area. So he lowered them.

It appears Baltimore would rather homeowners move because of rising assessments and higher taxes than its businesses.

Racism still exists in housing

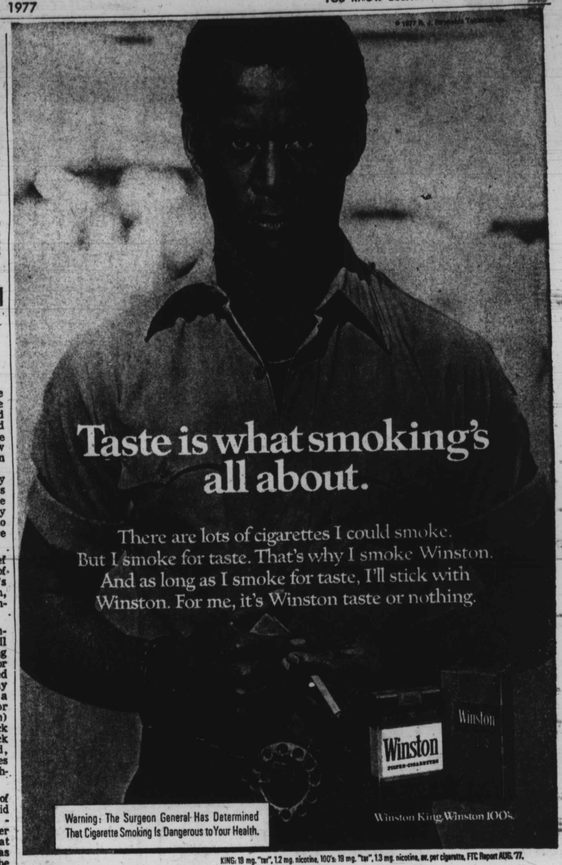
Blacks who are in the market for a new house will face under cover and sometimes unintended racism instead of the outright refusals to show them homes in certain neighborhoods.

A seminar sponsored by Baltimore Neighborhoods Inc. tried to answer some of the questions asked by real estate salesmen who wanted to know more about black buyers.

Frank E. Schwelb, chief of the housing section of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, spent two hours answering questions.

"One of the non-malicious — but still illegal — types of steering occurs when a realtor makes assumptions based on group desires that may not be applicable in a specific case. For example (the salesman) presumes that a black wants to live in a black neighborhood and, therefore, shows homes only in black areas," Schwelb said.

Although a number of real estate agents said they adhered to open-housing regulations, other salesmen contended that racial discrimination was still a strong force in the metropolitan area.



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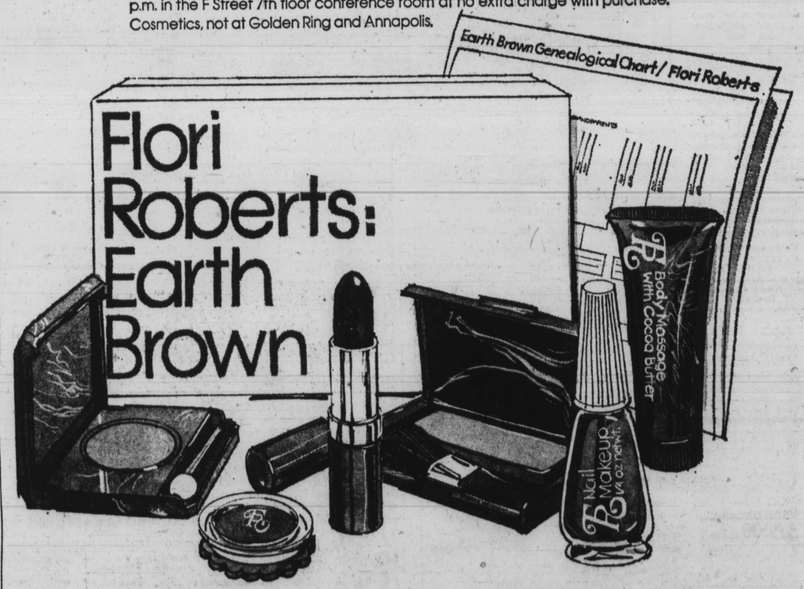

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