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Citizens need voice in Detroit renewal

Mayor Bing, others need input from residents before wholesale change is forced upon the city

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Detroit is facing big problems: declining population, budget deficits and a stagnant economy.

Discussions about fixing the city has generated dramatic ideas, including the Detroit Works Project — Mayor Bing's roadmap for the city's future. The plan calls for closing neighborhoods, cutting services and cultivating new industries. But even with the best of intentions, if city leaders don't learn from the city's urban renewal mistakes of the past, Detroit will be doomed to repeat them.

Although Detroit's population has declined by more than 1.3 million since 1950, the problems of how to make tough decisions remain unchanged.

After I moved to the state to attend the University of Michigan, I fell in love with the city of Detroit. I chose to write my senior thesis about how the city had made decisions in the past.

In particular, I sought to answer a simple question: Why had Detroit demolished Hastings Street, its culturally rich black main street, and other neighborhoods during urban renewal? I found a complicated story where flawed urban renewal policy and city politics came together at the expense of some of the city's most vulnerable citizens. As the city debates renewal again today, the history of Hastings Street offers lessons for Detroit's future.

In the 1940s, Detroit's city planners captured the era's best ideas about how modern cities should be designed. Captured by the 1946 Detroit Plan, this vision separated residential, industrial and commercial buildings by a network of freeways. The plans also proposed tearing down large neighborhoods that were deemed "slums," but also proposed building dozens of housing projects, a mass transit system and other public facilities.

The Housing Act of 1949 made federal urban renewal money available for Detroit to implement the plan, but the local political process intervened. When Mayor Albert Cobo was elected in the fall of 1949, the carefully laid plans were changed.

A white Republican, Cobo was the first mayor who won by splitting the electorate along racial — not class — lines. Advocates for housing and a more sensitive approach to urban renewal were forced out of city government. The slum clearance went forward. Public housing and desegregation of the housing market did not.

Within two years, Hastings Street was cleared for Interstate 75. The 120-acre "Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project" area was razed, displacing 1,238 dwelling units and more than 7,000 residents.

After sitting empty for over a decade, eventually the site would contain the Lafayette Towers project. Thousands were forced from their homes around the city, often in the poorest neighborhoods.

Voices of the past

The voices of regular people I found in the archives provided interesting perspective on these changes.

Harvey and Naomi Royal sent a handwritten petition of 30 neighbors who were forced to move to make way for the Edsel Ford Expressway, asking Gov. G. Mennen Williams "is it more human to build highways so people can kill themselves faster than it is to give people decent places to live?"

Property owners complained bitterly about the low assessments of their property. Caroline G. Moutray owned a 12-room house in the path of the Lodge Expressway. She said she had purchased it for \$19,000 in 1925 and invested an estimated \$29,000 more over the next 27 years. It was appraised at \$23,000. She wrote Williams in 1952: "I earned it by hard work and sweat and did without everything until I got it paid for. ... What is this, Russia or the U.S.A.?" A resident of St. Clair Shores, Vern Bernier, wrote the governor in 1950 to propose the city construct a light rail system.

These voices were shut out of the formal planning and redevelopment process. Their ideas for improved redevelopment, transportation and quality of life didn't contain all the answers to the city's ills. But their voices were the raw materials for a more democratic form of urban renewal.

Need to ensure full input

After graduating from Michigan, I earned a master's degree in city planning, a field that has changed tremendously since the 1940s. The lessons of the urban renewal era have convinced me that neither a purely top-down nor purely bottom-up strategy is the right way to handle the complex business of urban renewal. The only way to ensure all voices are heard is to transform the way decisions are made.

Quite simply, no elected official is in a position to unilaterally decide which residents should move. However, they do have a responsibility to manage the city and lead efforts to make hard choices if they are necessary.

Since the 1940s, American cities that have successfully tackled big problems do it through ongoing and transparent dialog, incorporating technical expertise appropriately and tailoring options to local conditions.

The building blocks for doing this are relationships and trust developed over decades. In recent years, diverse regions like Denver and Chicago have come together to forge regional plans for urban development. Others, including Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., have systems of neighborhood councils where residents discuss problems and connect with city officials. These systems have their drawbacks but function as a crucial civic infrastructure. Detroit lags behind these cities in institutions and relationships, but must build on what strengths exist.

Finally, the solutions must take into account Detroit's unique situation. The city's fate is closely tied with global trends out of its control. However, much can be done with the participation and cooperation of city neighborhoods, suburban residents, state policymakers and others.

The explosion of plans in recent years presents a huge range of ideas about how the city can "shrink to greatness." More importantly, exciting initiatives by Detroiters themselves in recent years to found new businesses and pursue sustainability and creativity contain the seeds for future development.

The voices of citizens affected by renewal must be heard. Dramatic, large-scale projects can have harmful and unexpected consequences. The history of urban planning has shown success occurs through a careful process of building consensus, detailed analysis and cooperative action.

Only time will tell whether Mayor Bing's Detroit Works Project will improve Detroit.

But as the difficult conversation about what can be done for a better future continues, it should draw from the important lessons from the city's past.

Additional Facts

About the author

Robert Goodspeed is a Ph.D. student in the MIT department of urban studies and planning. His research is in the use of the Internet and geographic information systems technologies for collaborative regional urban planning.

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