Mo(vement) Town:
Building Civic Engagement in the Detroit Region

Cindy Chavez, Elly Matsumura and David Bacon

With contributing authors Janet Anderson, Robin Boyle, Shayla Griffin and Steve Tobocman

WORKING PARTNERSHIPS USA

Detroit Collaborative Design Center
of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture

The 1000 Leaders Project

Funded by the Ford Foundation
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Detroit blazed the trail for the way people lived and worked in the urban United States in the twentieth century: a manufacturing-based economy; a large middle class that included many without advanced education; hasty growth; streams of immigrants from Europe, the Middle East and the American South; a central city that peaked and declined surrounded by miles of sprawling, white suburbs. To listen to the mainstream media, one would think that the now shrinking Detroit has been left behind by the twenty-first century. In fact, the region’s past and present have much to tell us about the future of the whole nation’s political economy. The decline of the economy and of twentieth-century civic institutions leaves a void of resources—both jobs and government support—that residents are scrambling to fill. This decline and residents’ focus on basic survival leave power vacuums that are being filled by forces pushing an agenda of smaller government and less democratic oversight.

The corporate barons during Detroit’s twentieth-century heyday engaged deeply in the civic and political life of the city. Their philanthropic endeavors built arts and cultural institutions as well as organizations oriented toward providing basic human services. It was not in their interest to invest in community organizing that could amass power to rival their own in the region. Unions organized to ensure that the vast wealth was shared through wages, not just through charity. But as racist land use policies drove white business and labor leaders into the suburbs, disinvestment in the increasingly black urban area began destroying the city’s infrastructure.

Churches and civic groups remained key venues of African American community organization, but many—much like their counterparts in organized labor—lost their focus on engaging their constituents and recruiting new leadership. With new federal programs during the War on Poverty and with the 1974 election of Coleman Young, the city’s first black mayor, government itself grew as a stronghold of black leadership. At the same time, however, the declining job base, population, and tax base gave government more problems to solve and less money with which to do so.

Thus Detroit’s civic institutions—those through which residents and workers can act as part of governance—are as much a legacy of the twentieth century as the auto industry, and are similarly troubled. Most are struggling to survive; some are struggling to reconnect with the grassroots; a few have come to recognize that these struggles are one and the same.

Meanwhile, others have arisen to fill the void. Detroit’s residents are organizing at the most grassroots level through activities from vacant lot clearance and impromptu playgrounds to citizen street patrols. This organizing is marked, however, by its relative disconnection from civic institutions and government. Connections to major existing civic institutions—which still retain a scale of resources and members—are absent or incipient. New institutions have yet to achieve comparable scale and may not be designed with that intention. Most importantly, these activists are not organized around a vision or strategy to change government and policy. These qualities are a reaction to the failures and current struggles of government and major civic institutions. Yet these organizing efforts are incubators for positive community change.

Opposing them are anti-democratic institutions. Conservative think tanks, anti-tax advocates, and Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity have successfully developed and moved an agenda of privatization and decreasing government accountability to residents. They lack a grassroots base in Detroit, but they have robust institutions and a very clear vision and strategy to change government and
Policy. Economist Milton Friedman states, “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend upon the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.” As a result of conservative institutions’ success in applying this strategy, the country’s blackest, lowest income major city—a city full of Democratic Party base voters—is marching down a path of low-wage jobs and smaller government with less direct oversight by constituents.

The stakes are high. If anti-government advocates can dominate a city like Detroit, they will replicate the model everywhere. By the same token, if Detroit’s emergent or reawakening civic institutions can engage a disaffected and disenfranchised community and turn around a city in such socioeconomic hardship, they will provide a critical lesson for the rest of the country. How can the movement infrastructure built in the twentieth century provide a springboard for organizing in the twenty-first? How can government earn residents’ and workers’ rekindled belief in it as a vehicle for meeting their economic needs? How can constituents develop institutions and policy agendas that don’t fall prey to corruption and ossification, as they did in the past? These are the critical questions for our contemporary democracy, and they are the urgent questions on the table right now in Detroit.

We offer a series of observations about institutional strategies that have the greatest potential to take Detroit beyond business as usual. These techniques would allow institutions to grow and connect with social movements, strengthen their own organizational capacity, and lay claim to public policy and public resources on behalf of communities. For each observation, we include one or more examples. The purpose of these examples is neither to evaluate nor to catalog comprehensively; it is to illustrate strategies with work happening in Detroit. Many efforts have significantly changed course during this project and thus some examples describe recent work rather than current work.

Following are nine strategies, organized under three overall goals: To strengthen movements, strengthen institutions, and engage with government. These nine brief points can be found in full in the Strategies section of the report.

Strengthen movements

1. Articulate broad vision

Bring key leaders and constituencies together around defining a shared vision that creates a sense of movement and long-term relationships, not just tactically motivated coalitions. Take this opportunity to position grassroots stakeholders and their institutions as propositional—proposing effective policy solutions—rather than only oppositional. Where advocates of alternative systems have articulated a compelling vision, how can this be translated into change for existing public systems? How can it be practiced at a scale large enough to demonstrate its viability as an alternative approach?

EXAMPLES:

**Urban agriculture** offers a vision that encompasses land use, economic development, community development, environmental improvement, and reduced obesity through changes in diet and exercise.

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all in one. Another such idea is **extracting value from Detroit’s waste stream**, both by introducing large scale recycling to the city and by salvaging reusable construction materials from abandoned buildings.

2. Organize

Organizing is distinct from civic engagement and from self-help, although it can and should build on both. Organizing develops the leadership of stakeholders—putting them in positions of organizational power—to identify root causes, craft real policy solutions, and act collectively to bring those solutions to fruition. Organizing in Detroit must aim to achieve both solution-orientation and scale sufficient to affect policy citywide and beyond.

**EXAMPLES:**

Harriet Tubman Center’s **Our Kids Come First** is an organization of parents that works on a range of community issues that affect youth. OKCF has historically worked on safe neighborhoods, employment, and transportation, and has had success running campaigns to demolish dangerous abandoned houses and to increase police patrols. The **Detroit Parent Network** is an organization that, as its Web site explains, “works to improve parent involvement in education by offering workshops, practical tools, written materials and leadership development, all designed to build a constituency of powerful parents for change.” As discussed above, some of the most promising organizing in Detroit takes place at a very grassroots and often informal level. Though it was beyond the scope of this research to document specific efforts, the report includes some broad discussion.

3. Bridge key constituencies

The region’s demographics should work for, not against, those aiming to build power for low-income communities and communities of color. Though divisions among constituencies are deep and real, every constituency has its boundary crossers. These leaders can be equipped with an understanding of the history behind divisions and statistics and a narrative to explain how unity and solidarity are more than nice ideas—they are hard-nosed necessities to win change.

**EXAMPLES:**

The **Latino community** in southwest Detroit, whose leadership is concentrated more in nonprofit service provision than in organizing and politics, is one such constituency. The Arab American community is another key piece of the puzzle. Its flagship organization is nonprofit service provider **Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS)**, but it has achieved recognition from the statewide progressive community for its organizing efforts. Another group is **Asian & Pacific Islander American Vote—Michigan**. This group promotes the civic engagement of this relatively new and immigrant-heavy community. Michigan’s **LGBT community** engages in increasingly challenging campaigns. After fending off—with labor’s help—an attack in the legislature against domestic partnership, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community will turn to efforts to pass nondiscrimination policies.
Strengthen institutions

4. Link movements to institutions and vice versa

Institutions can lend resources to burgeoning movements by providing meeting, event or office space; staff time; technical and policy expertise; spots in trainings; endorsements for events; fiscal sponsorship; connections to decision-makers; leadership opportunities; monetary donations; and more. Movements can reciprocate by seizing these opportunities, engaging in dialogue about vision and agenda, translating the significance of institutions’ agendas for the movement’s vision and principles, cultivating movement leaders for roles inside institutions, and turning out to actions.

EXAMPLES:
The United Auto Workers started the Gimme Five Initiative, under the new leadership of international president Bob King, to infuse throughout its membership the spirit of social unionism, the belief that unions exist not only to serve their members but to advance the interests of working people broadly. Members receive recognition for volunteer work including attending the actions of others’ social and economic justice campaigns.

In the urban agriculture movement, Detroit’s strong separatist and survivalist urges are bubbling up into the mainstream. Land use policies restricting agricultural activities place urban farmers in a position of needing to change “the system” rather than just ignoring it. Two factors may slow or stop them from developing a broader policy agenda and power beyond their immediate issue areas. First, the main public policies at hand place urban agriculturalists in an oppositional position—fighting against regulations that would stop what they are doing—rather than a propositional one. Second, enforcement of these regulations has been limited because of the perceived trendiness of the movement and because the City government is not yet ready to propose new regulations absent a broader land use strategy. Nonetheless, the City’s creation of a Food Policy Council and the fact that candidates for office are coming out of the movement suggest that it may have a longer-term toehold inside government.

5. Build capacity for research and policy development

Civic engagement infrastructure must include think tanks that can define problems and craft solutions from the perspective of grassroots stakeholders and in partnership with those who understand political dynamics. No matter how loud the community’s voice is, unless it has the means in its own hands to analyze policy and propose alternatives, it will always be dependent upon those who do. Communities also need tactical research to ensure that campaign goals are practical and have impact.

EXAMPLE:
The mission of the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign (DVPC) is to assist in the productive use or re-use of vacant property in Detroit. Specifically, DVPC works by assisting local community organizations and neighborhood associations in developing and implementing vacant property plans. It provides community development corporations (CDCs), neighborhood associations, block clubs, residents, churches, businesses, and others with a “toolbox” of strategies to address vacant property problems as well as assistance with specific technical requests and small grants to offset costs of do-it-yourself vacant property maintenance and security initiatives. Though DVPC’s role has not been to engage residents in changing policy, assisting them to understand and use policy expertly is a critical building block.
6. Develop leaders

There is no shortage of talent in Detroit. Many community leaders have left, however, from block club heads and Girl Scout troop leaders to local school/community organizers, shop stewards, and deacons. Leadership development programs can create successors and provide forums to do much of the work described above. They can build long-term relationships, provide vision, retell history in a way that encourages action, convene boundary-crossers, and foster a movement culture of solidarity and perseverance in the hard work of organizing. They can translate research into popular education that develops and affirms the expertise of grassroots stakeholders.

EXAMPLE:

The Building Movement Project is a national network of individual partners exploring different facets of making the nonprofit community more oriented toward advancing the movement for progressive social change. Its work on how to develop leaders from service-provision nonprofits into doing social change work was piloted in Detroit. This work raises the potential to tap into the region’s vast nonprofit infrastructure as a force for grassroots power. Its Detroit-based partner has been supporting community organizing in the North End for years via strategic and planning support for Storehouse of Hope and Greater Woodward Community Development Corporation. The Detroit work has drawn on BMP’s national use of a frame of “the commons” to talk about why it’s important to develop leaders’ understanding of and commitment to government accountability on issues like revenue options for budgets, responsible contracting, and community benefits.

Engage with government

The public sector by nature constitutes the largest pool of resources subject to broad democratic control. In order to bring significant change in the lives of constituents, social movements and their institutions must prioritize efforts to use this common wealth for the common good.

7. Take on the big issues

Major policy changes are taking place in Detroit governing the allocation of massive public resources for decades to come. Communities must organize to shape the outcome.

EXAMPLE:

Doing Development Differently in Detroit (D4) describes itself as “a diverse coalition of residents, unions, environmental, faith-based and community organizations united to strengthen metro Detroit through meaningful community engagement in the creation of sustainable ‘win-win’ development strategies.” It hopes to work with existing economic development projects to expand the pie so that they benefit those who traditionally have been left out of the old economic model. Its campaigns include community benefits for the New International Trade Crossing and associated development and for the $30 million in federally funded weatherization programs to be run through the Southeast Michigan Regional Energy Office.
8. Prioritize campaigns to increase government accountability

Detroit is caught in a spiral of policies and efforts that move important resources and decisions out of the realm of direct public oversight and accountability. Policies that create checks and balances and opportunities for communities to shape decisions have never been more important. Getting involved with policy enforcement and implementation is also critical; lack of implementation has been the graveyard for too many social justice victories in Detroit.

**EXAMPLE:**

The **Campaign for Liquor Licensing Responsibility**, a project of D4, aims simply to create an additional point of leverage over all businesses with liquor licenses—markets and restaurants, primarily. In a city grappling with the absence of any major chain grocery stores and a lack of access to fresh food, this policy could provide a tool down the road.

9. Prioritize producing tangible outcomes

Social movements must appeal to self-interests while showing the ways in which these interests are mutual and transcendent. With Detroit’s deep divisions and deep poverty, tangible wins are a non-negotiable feature of any effort that aims to keep people involved over a length of time. Campaigns to broaden the benefit of the resources of the public sector provide an important opportunity to produce tangible outcomes.

**EXAMPLE:**

The purpose of the **Ban the Box** campaign is to assist returning citizens in obtaining meaningful employment. It won a policy to prohibit the City from asking on its job application forms whether an applicant had a prior criminal record. The Ban the Box campaign is now working to get the City of Detroit to adopt an ordinance that would require vendors to ban the box on their own job application forms.

**A comprehensive approach**

As demonstrated by the examples, Detroit’s community leaders and institutions possess all of these capacities. What is missing—and has transformative potential—is an approach that combines all of these strategies into an organization, campaign or alliance. Strong social movements organize into institutions and boundary-crossing coalitions and develop leaders that can propose a broad vision and effective public policy solutions for the immediate and long-term benefit of their communities.

**Philanthropy’s role in building civic engagement in Detroit**

Foundations aiming to build powerful grassroots engagement in Detroit must understand the unconventional role that much of the philanthropic community has decided to play there and the range of community responses to that. As described by Kresge Foundation President Rip Rapson:
“Philanthropy working in Detroit can no longer sit at the margins, hoping that their good intentions and charitable impulses will help the community slide through tough times. Instead, foundations—both national and local—are positioning themselves at the center of a new civic agenda, aggressively helping shape a very different civic trajectory.” This choice to back specific policies and development projects and support them by sitting at decision-making tables can place funders at odds with community agendas—or on one side of an issue over which the community is deeply divided. The only way to address these concerns is to support efforts with the greatest potential to grow the community’s power at the decision-making table. The critique that such efforts are beholden to their funders is inevitable, but if grantees’ civic engagement work is effective and advances policy dialogue through constructive disagreement with other stakeholders as warranted, it will speak for itself. Kresge, Ford, Kellogg, Mott and Skillman Foundations are among many that have put resources into civic engagement in Detroit.

As for what constitutes the greatest potential, we offer the observations above. These aim to capture what Detroiterst know, have told us, and are doing about the need to build power. We hope that it offers a framework and language for constructive discussions of strategy among those who share the commitment to renew democracy and shared prosperity in Detroit.
INTRODUCTION

To a greater or lesser degree, all of America’s great industrial cities have suffered the same fate. If the crisis of decline in Detroit seems deeper than most, it is in large part due to the rapid and dizzying heights that its economy reached during the mid-twentieth century as one of the most heavily industrialized places on the planet.

In the 1930s, the Ford River Rouge plant alone, in nearby Dearborn, employed more than 100,000 workers. Counting their families, direct employment at the plant supported perhaps half a million people. And for each assembly plant job, four or five more were created in parts plants or in the businesses serving the needs of the workers. Those workers had families as well. One plant gave work and life to well over a million people.

The Rouge was just the largest of many auto assembly factories in the metropolitan area. Detroit was a monoculture growing one crop—cars—and its workers were among the most skilled anywhere.

Detroit grew to be one of the country’s most African American cities as well. That too was a product of the auto industry, which together with the Midwest’s steel mills drew people from the South in one of the largest internal migrations of modern times.

Today, most of Detroit’s auto plants are closed. Jobs that paid a wage that allowed parents to send their children to college disappeared, as auto manufacturers moved production to countries with wages that don’t allow such luxuries. And today a greater percentage of African Americans are part of the population of Mississippi than any other state, as the great migration reverses itself.

How could Detroit not be in crisis?

This report is based on a series of studies that examined the depth of that crisis. A summary of historical highlights is followed by an examination of this particular historical moment and the arguments for taking action now to rebuild Detroit. An overview is presented of the major centers of economic, political and community power.

The purpose of this report, however, is to examine the possibilities for change that can create a thriving region for all residents. It therefore analyzes the strength of the civic engagement ecosystem in Detroit and sets out recommendations for building social movements and institutions advocating a new vision of how the city and region and its government could be. Finally, it provides a discussion of organizations whose current programs and approaches exemplify such strategies.
DEFINING THE CRISIS

Economic decline in Detroit can be measured with many yardsticks—unemployment, housing, illiteracy and poor schools, and a lack of the services its people need to survive from day to day. But one of the most dramatic is the size of the city’s population itself.

By the 1950 census, Detroit’s population had reached its highest point—1,849,568 people living in the city limits, with many more in Flint, Dearborn, and the other satellite auto towns around it. The 2010 census pegged Detroit’s population at 713,777, the lowest since the 1910 census. The city lost about a quarter of its population—273,500 people—in the last ten years.

The flight of plants and people has had a profound impact.

First, many people, especially those who formerly had stable, middle-class incomes, today have no jobs. Downsizing in the auto industry went on for so long that a new generation of people has grown to working age with no hope of the kind of employment and stability enjoyed by their parents.

In October 2009 the Bureau of Labor Statistics found the city’s official unemployment rate was 27 percent. High rates of unemployment and low-wage service jobs, in turn, produce widespread poverty. Over the last decade, median household income dropped by 31 percent within Detroit and by 24 percent in the region around the city.

The declining tax base has eroded the ability of the city to supply basic services, and it can no longer maintain and manage its public workers, its water system, its buses, or its parks. The Detroit public schools lost half their students over the last decade, a rate even faster than the loss of population generally. The Detroit Literacy Coalition estimates that 47 percent of adults in the city are functionally illiterate, compared to 18 percent in the state as a whole.

Detroit occupies 138.7 square miles of land, with 350,000 homes. While there are plenty of apartments, the city was one of the places where the postwar dream of the single-family home was realized by large numbers of working-class families. Today 26 percent of the city’s residential lots—91,000 lots—are vacant, with 78,000 in foreclosure. When combined with vacant non-residential properties, this amounts to 30 percent of the city—or roughly 40 square miles—sitting empty.

The decline of Detroit has paralleled the rise of its suburbs. Urban dwellers who are 77 percent black and earn a median annual household income of $26,098 are surrounded by suburban residents who are 83 percent white with more than double the income.

\[2\] Detroit Literacy Coalition citing National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) “done in the 1990’s (and endorsed by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) of 2003)” at http://www.detroitliteracy.org/faq.htm, However, the author’s research has not been able to locate an independent source for this fact, nor a definition of “illiteracy.”

\[3\] Detroit Residential Parcel Survey, www.detroitparcelsurvey.org, conducted by the Detroit Office of Foreclosure Prevention and Response, Community Legal Resources and Data Driven Detroit. February 2010. This survey included single-family houses, duplexes, and multi-family structures, but not large apartment buildings or commercial structures.

\[4\] 2009 American Community Survey 1-year and 5-year estimates as accessed on January 4, 2011, at factfinder.census.gov.

\[6\] 2009 study by the Detroit Free Press.
The Brookings Institution found that more than 90 percent of employment in the Detroit region had moved outside of the core business district in the region; nearly 75 percent of African Americans in the region were physically segregated from jobs, compared to about one-third of whites and more than half of African Americans in the rest of the country.\(^7\)

While only 36 percent of the total population lived in the region’s low opportunity neighborhoods (which represent two-fifths of the neighborhoods in the region), 90 percent of the African American population were found in low opportunity neighborhoods. In contrast, only 19 percent of whites lived in low opportunity communities. While more than 43 percent of the region’s total population lived in high opportunity neighborhoods, less than 4 percent of the African American population lived in these communities.\(^8\)

Such devastation of a community necessarily devastates its civic participation. Leaders leave. Institutions invest resources where the population is large and growing. Those left behind struggle to survive, having little time and energy for anything but day-to-day activities. This perpetuates a vicious cycle. Grassroots engagement helped build Detroit’s glory days—most notably, union workers organizing for wages that created a large middle class. At the same time, however, flaws in the power dynamics both within those movements and between them and elites—namely, racism in employment and land use policies—introduced key vulnerabilities that have made Detroit’s decline so dire. How can contemporary grassroots movements and institutions prevent the replication of the same mistakes in today’s policies?


HISTORY

Detroit’s main civic institutions, including government, the school system, and its commercial and financial enterprises, were created during the period when the city was thriving and jobs were numerous. Workers organized the United Auto Workers to make and keep auto jobs well-paid; it became the giant of a large and powerful labor movement in the region overall.

The great bifurcation between the city and its suburbs, because of factors of race and factory location, began early on. In 1950, the population of Detroit was over 1.8 million with about 1.1 million living in the suburbs. By 1960, the population of the suburbs surged to over 2 million while Detroit’s dropped by over 100,000 and continued its decline over subsequent decades. Detroit’s racial divisions—divisions based on income disparity, unequal access to services, and the unequal burden of paying for them—are all exacerbated by the urban/suburban divide.

Today the separation of interests is becoming more acute, as a conservative state government with decreasing urban representation has gained the power to unseat elected officials and impose drastic austerity measures on urban cities and school districts through appointed administrators. This will make it much more difficult for Detroit residents to make the decisions and mobilize the political power needed to turn their city around.

The modern city

Detroit, as a modern city, is a product of the automobile industry. Henry Ford located his first automobile factory in the city in 1903. He was joined by the Dodge Brothers, Walter Chrysler, and others. Ford famously offered workers a wage of five dollars a day with the vision of demand-side economics: that well-paid auto workers would be a crucial part of an economy with ample consumers for Ford’s new product. Thus the concept of a middle class defined by consumerism, dependence on the automobile, and auto-oriented land-use patterns were foundational to the growth of the region.

Between 1900 and 1910, the population nearly doubled to over 460,000. Auto barons built the city’s Gilded Age mansions and buildings, many of which remain. Jobs and growing population gave the city prosperity, and Detroit was referred to as the Paris of the West for its architecture.

From 1940 to 1943, over 200,000 migrant workers made their way to the city. Many, both African American and white, came from communities in the South. They brought with them the South’s racial attitudes and even its racist organizations. Black workers were given the dirtiest, lowest status jobs. Once in Detroit, they faced segregation and discrimination that made them dependent on conservative black leaders who believed in black capitalism as the means of self-help.9

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10 See Steve Babson with Ron Alpern, Dave Elsila, and John Revitte, Working Detroit (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1986), chapter entitled “Ford, the Last Mile” for further discussion of this and other information in this report regarding UAW history, and chapter entitled “From Class War to World War” for further discussion of the Great Migration.
The rise and fall of labor

The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (which became today’s UAW) was one of the most important parts of Detroit life that organized against racial tension. The union signed its first contract with General Motors in 1936. But it wasn’t until the beginning of the 1940s when a growing minority of black workers and professionals believed the UAW-CIO, not Henry Ford, was the best friend of black people. The 1941 Miller Road riots broke out during a walk-out by both black and white workers, when 1,500 to 2,000 black workers remained as strikebreakers. When the struck factory’s owner tried to incite a race riot between white picketers and black strikebreakers, the UAW worked with the black community to get 1,000 of the strikebreakers to join the strike. Traditional black organizations rejected efforts by owners to incite race violence. Some came out in favor of unions and stopped their vocal support of Ford.

Rapid migration resulted in extreme housing shortages. That, plus rampant discrimination and segregation, led to tension between white and black residents. In June 1943 it exploded in the Detroit Race Riot, which lasted for three days before federal troops restored order. Rallies were organized to show that many union workers believed in integration on principle and knew that racial unity was needed for the union to survive. By 1950, many union members believed in workplace integration, but still lived and socialized in segregated neighborhoods. As factories and white and middle class workers increasingly moved out of the city, so did UAW membership, leadership, and political priorities. The union “lost its formal commitment to racial equality”.

Many black labor organizers applied their union experience in Detroit to civil rights activities. The Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC), a group of black union leaders, pressed for more black representation in labor leadership and for changes in labor policies that were unfair to black union members. The TULC also supported mayoral candidate Jerome Cavanaugh, while the UAW endorsed a candidate who condoned police brutality. In 1962, Cavanaugh and TULC’s slate of five council candidates were elected. The next year Cavanaugh marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. down Woodward Avenue.

The UAW’s involvement with the city of Detroit has waxed and waned. It increased for a period following the 1960s and civil rights movement, when its productive confrontation with its own institutional racism brought its focus back into the increasingly black urban center. But the globalization of the auto industry has pulled the UAW’s focus away from its hometown.

Suburbanization

Thomas Sugrue writes in The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit: “Detroit’s postwar urban crisis emerged as a consequence of two of the most important, interrelated and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality.”

In the years following World War II, the civic leaders of Detroit began urban renewal projects, which

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11 Babson et al., op. cit., p. 163.
12 See Babson et al., op. cit., chapter entitled “Crossing the Color Line.”
13 Sugrue, op. cit., p. 5.
in most cases displaced poorer, black segregated residents. This did nothing to relieve the housing crunch or racial tensions. One of the most poignantly remembered such projects was in Black Bottom, the hub of African American businesses and social institutions in Detroit for much of the middle of the twentieth century, while the adjacent Paradise Valley was the site of nationally famous jazz clubs and nightlife. In 1956, Detroit’s city planners launched an ambitious “urban renewal” program to bulldoze Black Bottom in order to develop Lafayette Park, a 78-acre, garden-like urban community with high rises and townhomes. The destruction of the community’s rich cultural and retail district was complete and another has arguably never grown to replace it.

Some of the city’s manufacturing plants also moved out of the city center, which further encouraged suburbanization as workers moved closer to jobs. While this flight from the city included some middle class black families, for the most part during this era, those who left were white. Black families had to fight racial covenants, redlining and hostile neighbors. Meanwhile city leaders focused on building limited access highways instead of improving public transit. That made it easier for white residents to flee to often segregated suburbs in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties.

Between 1950 and 1980 Detroit lost hundreds of thousands of residents. City property values dropped dramatically, along with city revenue and services, which, in turn, caused continued emigration out of the city center. Some of the city’s manufacturing plants also moved out of the city center, which further encouraged suburbanization as workers moved closer to jobs. As members of the Detroit middle class exited the city, they took with them tax dollars and capital the city needed to be able to provide services to the residents who remained.

In addition to relatively high working-class incomes that afforded working families the opportunity to own a single-family home, car and garage, Detroit’s suburban sprawl was spurred by the development of one of the nation’s most significant metropolitan freeway systems. It is one of the most sprawling regions in Michigan, a state that has continued to sprawl over the last forty years.

School integration has been another flashpoint of race relations in the Detroit region. Some scholars have argued that the Milliken v. Bradley Supreme Court decision of 1974 marked the true death of Detroit’s educational system. Prior to this decision Detroit planned to abide by federal desegregation mandates stemming from Brown v. Board of Education (1954) by busing students across fifty-three district lines. However, the Milliken decision limited the mandate to integration within city limits. Therefore, white districts did not have to integrate with the mostly black city of Detroit. White families could (and did) flee Detroit for the suburbs to avoid sending their children to racially integrated schools. By 1978 the Detroit Public School system was 84 percent African American. School segregation by race and class continues as an issue into the present as Michigan’s schools-of-choice policy allows Detroit students to attend suburban schools and as suburbs split their school districts to contain black Detroiters in one while reserving the other for predominantly white suburban residents.

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14 Originally named for its rich marsh soils (and home to springs sourcing the River Savoyard, buried for sewer use in 1836), the neighborhood received its names prior to the arrival of African American residents.

15 http://www.somacon.com/p469.php contains some wonderful graphic representations of population changes between Detroit and the surrounding areas from 1900-2010, as well as a census-by-census analysis of population growth and loss mapped against the regional freeway system.


The impact of race on the suburbanization of the region cannot be overstated. Regardless of the index or methodology used, metropolitan Detroit ranks as the most or one of the most segregated regions in the nation. More than 90 percent of employment in the Detroit region has moved outside of the core business district in the region, while nearly 75 percent of African Americans in the region are physically segregated from jobs, compared to about one-third of whites and more than half of African Americans in the rest of the country. Although these divisions of race and access to opportunity initially lay along the lines between city and suburb, in more recent decades the inner-ring suburbs have become predominantly black, lower-income and declining and a second generation of white flight has extended into the exurbs.

Today, many activists share a resigned and cynical outlook toward significant and meaningful efforts to create more regional solutions to the land-use issues in metro Detroit. For many, the ambitious and vibrant efforts to bring regional solutions to the area’s land-use challenges exhibited a decade ago are virtually dead. Historically, the region saw divisions between the city and its surrounding suburbs deepen as racial segregation between a predominantly black city and predominantly white suburbs increased. These divisions have been deepened by a long history of incendiary rhetoric used by politicians like Mayor Coleman Young (and more recently by members of the Detroit City Council), as well as suburban politicians like Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson and state legislators. Most recently, the region has fought over management and control of the regional water system, as well as other City of Detroit institutions such as the Detroit Institute of Arts and Cobo Hall Convention Center. These fights have all but squashed meaningful dialogue about more ambitious regional solutions to problems such as tax sharing, shared services, and regional transit.

Race relations inside an increasingly African American city

During the 1960s, racial tension grew. Poor people in general, and black people in particular, expected the Great Society policies and civil rights movement to create concrete improvements in their lives. Blacks in Detroit, who suffered severe housing discrimination, were especially frustrated. On July 23, 1967, a police raid on an after-hours bar triggered one of the biggest riots in American history. As many factories moved to the suburbs, conditions in inner city plants were the worst in the industry. Black and white workers often felt neglected by union leadership. A new generation of militant black workers organized the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, DRUM, and accused Chrysler of recruiting common laborers from the black ghetto while going to white suburbs to recruit supervisors and skilled workers. More “RUMs” were formed in other plants and came together in 1969 in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The League eventually lost the support of older blacks and most whites and collapsed in 1971. But the turmoil it created forced companies to hire more black foremen and the UAW to hire more black staff. Many local unions elected black presidents.

In the 1970s, Detroit had the highest number of civilian police killings in the nation, mostly caused by a 100-man unit called STRESS (Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets). Every civilian death but one was black. The anti-STRESS movement made police brutality a key mayoral issue. Coleman Young promised to abolish the unit if elected; when he won, he did. Affirmative action became a key issue.

19 Babson et al., op. cit., pp. 174-175.
in Detroit politics as well, as black workers sought to end a white monopoly on better jobs. Court cases found that companies (in some cases with the support of local unions) were not giving equal opportunities to black workers. The support for affirmative action became deep and widespread in the city, making later efforts to abolish it in education extremely bitter and hard-fought.

The election of Coleman A. Young in 1974 as Detroit’s first black mayor was on par with the 1967 riot in elevating race as a central concern in city and regional politics. The new mayor was described as “outspoken, brusque and opinionated, and prone to anger when challenged by the press.” His central campaign promise to strengthen the city’s economy, bringing jobs and rebuilding the African American business community, alienated many white, often suburban, Detroiter and continues to attract controversy into the present day, more than a decade after his death.

Young used federal grants as leverage to forge partnerships with many of Detroit’s leading business corporations, acquiring private property via eminent domain to transfer title to other private entities. This process was most noticeably used to acquire land for what became known as the “Poletown” plant, a new large automobile assembly facility for General Motors. This resulted in the loss of 1,176 properties, affecting almost 3,500 residents, and in excess of 600 businesses. Four Roman Catholic churches, one Protestant church, and one public school were demolished as part of the wholesale clearance of the neighborhoods, adding to the civic memory of forced relocation and the growing anger in the white community against Mayor Young.

Young’s legacy must also be seen in terms of his achievements to bring blacks into government and into the highest offices of his administration, what was termed the “opening up” of civic space for African Americans. By his second term of office, it was estimated that 40 percent of his appointees and senior management were black, representing a huge change from the domination by whites just a decade before. Young also greatly expanded the use of minority contracting, garnering accusations of steering City contracts to friends, family, and political supporters. This scrutiny of government contracting of black-owned businesses and allies of politicians lingered through the subsequent mayoral administrations.

**Shrinking resources**

As racially driven dynamics drive jobs, residents, and investment out of the city of Detroit, it is caught in a downward spiral of shrinking resources. Government departments have lost many of their most experienced professionals and support staff, leaving appointed departmental leaders with a depleted civil service with low morale and limited skill sets. Nonprofits and the community development corporations have lost revenues over recent years; accordingly, the loss of effective personnel has been devastating. Other smaller nonprofits are losing their experienced leadership through age or simple burnout. Salaries have fallen precipitously as fee income from housing development has dried up,
with CDC directors seeking alternative employment, often outside the city. More responsibility and expectations fall on fewer individuals. Civic leaders are expected to have vision, as well as the ability to manage the city’s day-to-day affairs. Managers in both public and private sectors are asked to balance budgets and provide effective services with fewer resources and a smaller, weakened, demoralized labor force. They are asked to be change agents, against the odds—to plan and deliver with less. They are expected to have vision when the challenges of the moment are overwhelming.

Public sector and nonprofit sector initiatives are challenged by significant resource constraints. Simply put, with rising poverty, unemployment, abandonment, and blight, the challenges are much greater; yet the resources to address those challenges are greatly diminished. Combined with the ethical crisis faced by Detroit government, those leaders who remain face often-insurmountable external and internal pressures to focus on taking care of their immediate networks.

The effect of all these forces to create a leadership vacuum could be neutralized if robust mechanisms were in place to develop leaders from the ground up. But many organizations whose ostensible role this is are struggling, too. Justice-oriented organizations, like labor unions and government itself, were successful in enacting far-reaching policies in earlier moments of Detroit’s history and gained some power as a result. But being on the inside often meant they didn’t continue to push as hard as they could have to ensure implementation of the policies they fought for. Perhaps the work of maintaining an institution diverted resources from the work of continuing to develop new leaders and expand their bases. Eventually, this led to a disintegration of the organizing capacity that they once had.

Business and philanthropy thus stand alone as sectors with adequate resources to think long-term, proactively promoting leaders and investing in broad vision. The section on who can and will make change further examines their roles.

“Business and philanthropy thus stand alone as sectors with adequate resources to think long-term, proactively promoting leaders and investing in broad vision.”
WHY ACT NOW

Detroiter are proud people. Like residents of any Midwest city suffering the impact of deindustrialization and job loss, they will tell you horror stories about the extent and depth of their region’s crisis. But talk of its death, especially by outsiders, even those with good intentions, brings an angry response. Detroiter will also give you examples of the many progressive movements that have developed and flourished over the last half century, when the city has supposedly been in decline. They will point to the national role played by its political leaders like Congressman John Conyers, D-Detroit, who courageously supported broad health care reform and who has been one of the country’s strongest advocates for peace and social justice. Further, Detroiter will cite the wealth of activity and creativity shown by residents in meeting the many challenges they live through every day.

Yet it is also true that great cities can suffer so much that they reach a tipping point, in which forward progress not only becomes almost impossible, but in which all the energy and work of its people is bound up in trying to halt or just slow the slide in their basic living conditions. In that context, the kinds of policies pursued in the city, and in Michigan as a whole, can help put the city on a road to recovery or make the slide even steeper and faster. Further, there is a point at which the city’s organizations and human resources must be effectively employed if it is to pull back from the brink.

The eyes of the nation are on Detroit. What happens in Detroit matters. Policies that work or even initially appear to work here will be replicated in other places.

The rules are changing

In Detroit and Michigan, a massive number of policy battles are in progress which have game-changing potential. The outcomes of many will govern what kinds of changes are possible and how the change process takes place. They may alter the playing field as a whole, including determining who wields power. In this process, it may become much more difficult for common people to hold the structures of power accountable.

Statewide changes

EMERGENCY MANAGERS

Public Act 4, and the appointment of emergency managers, removes the direct accountability of local government to its constituents. House Bill 4214 was introduced by State Representative Al Pscholka (R-Stevensville) on February 9, 2011. It passed the legislature and was signed into law as Public Act 4 of 2011 on March 16 by Governor Rick Snyder, a mere two and a half months after his inauguration.

This law adds to the conditions that can trigger the appointment of an emergency manager for fiscally failing municipalities and school districts and greatly enhances her or his powers. The governor is empowered to initiate a review board to determine if a locality is in financial emergency and appoint an emergency manager to the locality. State Treasurer Andy Dillon, a conservative, anti-abortion Democrat who lost the 2010 gubernatorial primary due to labor’s opposition, will ultimately decide what constitutes financial emergency and will oversee the review process that leads to receivership.
The emergency manager has the power to cancel or amend existing government or school employee union collective bargaining agreements and other contracts. School EMs would have authority over academic matters. An EM could also order new borrowing, put a property tax increase on the ballot, remove elected officials from office, dissolve political structures such as councils, commissions, and school boards, and force consolidation of services in schools, townships, cities, and counties. This represents a dramatic shift of authority away from local elected officials to statewide executives and their appointees.

An op-ed piece in the Detroit News urged the governor not to sign the bill, saying he should "think about why a single bureaucrat, appointed by the state treasurer, should have the power to suspend or dismiss elected officials or strip union rights." Thousands of teachers, firefighters, building trades-workers, nurses, state workers and other supporters rallied at the Capitol against it.

According to Michigan Forward, "cities like Benton Harbor, Pontiac, Flint, and Highland Park and the Detroit Public Schools have been targeted and taken over—all places that have large populations of people of color." In Pontiac, the financial manager sold the treasured and historic Pontiac Silverdome stadium for only $583,000 when it cost over $55 million to build. Detroit Public Schools' two most recent state-appointed receivers have increased the deficit or debt of the system during their tenure.

STATE TAX PROPOSALS

Tax changes by state government are expected to cause Detroit’s economic crisis to become much worse. Governor Rick Snyder announced a novel two-year budget early in his term; one of the proposals eventually signed into law was ending the Michigan Business Tax and its surcharge by replacing it with a flat, 6 percent corporate tax. The tax rollback represents a $1.8 billion tax cut for businesses.

The governor used a hardball approach to eliminating tax credits and provisions favoring one activity over another in order to create the lowest corporate tax rate without devastating revenue. He proposed to make up the shortfall in the budget through a combination of revenue generation by taxing earned pension income, major changes to the tax code removing most existing exceptions, and deep cuts to state services, notably to education. What he ultimately signed rolled back the Earned Income Tax Credit and eliminated the college tax credit.

Governor Snyder’s initial announcements also included “elimination of statutory revenue sharing payments for cities, villages and townships in fiscal year 2012 to be replaced with a new incentive-based revenue sharing program available to cities, villages and townships that meet state standards and adopt best practices” such as consolidation of services and pension reform. Already faced with falling tax rolls and increasing demand for local services—the Michigan Fiscal Agency reports total state statutory revenue sharing payments have dropped by nearly 70 percent over the last eleven years—many units of local government face a bleak future and an increasing risk of the imposition of emergency management.

ROLLBACK OF COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mark T. Gaffney, president of the Michigan AFL-CIO, says the emergency manager situation strongly affects collective bargaining and could result in up to 50,000 workers losing their contracts and collective bargaining rights for up to five years. Among dozens of other moves to reduce the power of organized workers, Governor Snyder ended the collective bargaining rights and employee status of almost 26,000 childcare workers who still belong to the UAW and the AFSCME unions. Their wages, as proposed in the governor’s budget, would drop to $1.35 an hour per child.

“This represents a dramatic shift of authority away from local elected officials to statewide executives and their appointees.”
Changes in Detroit

DETROIT WORKS PROJECT

About 30 percent of Detroit is lying vacant. The wholesale abandonment of Detroit, and the consequent cancer of blight, has itself become a self-perpetuating source of decline. In this context of an increasingly empty city, the idea of “downsizing” or “right sizing” the city, re-imagining a smaller or more compact place, re-emerged as a political issue in the 2009 mayoral election and the first months of Mayor David Bing’s administration.

The Detroit Works Project represents one of the most ambitious and high-profile land use planning efforts in the City of Detroit in the last twenty-five years. It has come to embody the realization that Detroit’s population loss is so severe and permanent that the City’s land use planning efforts need a paradigm shift from how to recover or stabilize population growth to “shrinking” the city or readjusting land use plans to better align municipal services and resources as well as steering economic development efforts to denser neighborhoods.

The Detroit Works Project has enormous social justice implications. Its most controversial element has been the targeting of seven to nine neighborhoods for investment and stabilization resources. The Detroit Works Project rolled out a civic engagement process in 2010-11 that was severely criticized by the community as inadequate or insincere. Over the summer of 2011, Mayor Bing announced a shift to two separate efforts. One would craft short-term interventions to deal with immediate problems at the nexus of land use and government resources and service delivery. The second would be a long-term process engaging residents and stakeholders in envisioning the new land use model for Detroit.

CHARTER REVISION

In May 2009, Detroit voters approved a ballot question to seat a Charter Revision Commission. The move for City Charter revision and a concurrent initiative to place a question on the November 2009 ballot to elect city council members from districts were tied to collective dissatisfaction with a creeping culture of corrupt and ineffectual—and sometimes churlish—local government leadership. The commission also spent significant energy on addressing conflict and rebalancing power between the mayor and the city council, long a controversy in Detroit and named as a reason for government ineffectiveness. Additional key issues include a protocol for removing or disciplining an elected official accused of wrongdoing and reducing the dozens of city departments or agencies that are charter-mandated. The commission’s recommendations are on the November 2011 ballot.

DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Detroit Public Schools, administered from March 2009 to May 2011 by appointed manager Robert Bobb, have been subject to extreme measures in the name of righting the ship. Bobb closed fifty-nine schools and reconstituted thirty-nine. During the 2009-2010 school year, 36 percent of students (50,139) in Detroit attended charter schools. If the district continues with the Renaissance 2012 plan, DPS will be second only to New Orleans, where 61 percent of students attend charter schools.24 Bobb’s initial Renaissance 2012 plan proposed to convert another forty-one schools (30 percent of the district) serving 16,000 students into charter schools. The speed of Bobb’s proposed conversion

drew criticism even from charter school advocates. Bobb’s plan to transform DPS schools into charter schools is linked to the Deficit Elimination Plan—an agreement he made with the State of Michigan. This plan required that the district close seventy schools over the following two years and raise class sizes to sixty students at the high school level. His privatization initiative eliminated 1,429 non-faculty positions (13 percent of the workforce). Within the next several years, the public school system in Detroit will be largely under private control.

Policy change can make job creation possible

Detroit’s demographic and economic losses in the last decade have created a widespread perception that it is crossing the point of no return. Yet political changes may make possible what Detroit needs most: massive investment in projects with the potential to create large numbers of jobs. Several large public works projects are already on line, but require a political commitment for their realization.

National and philanthropic attention to Detroit is unprecedented. Funder collaborative Living Cities chose Detroit as the site for the unveiling of its current round of major investments. Detroit was also the location for the most recent US Social Forum. And the Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities chose Detroit for its March conference.

The suburbs have started to experience population loss in the last decade for the first time—a unique moment. But it is accompanied by a dramatic increase in populations of color and immigrants in the suburbs. This creates great potential for shifting political dynamics. At the same time, projects are on the table with true potential to get significant, much-needed investment into Detroit with large quantities of jobs attached.

Woodward Corridor

The City of Detroit is at the center of a region that is highly dependent on automobiles as the sole means of personal mobility. While Detroit and its surrounding suburbs support a regional bus system (Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, or SMART) and Detroit runs its own service (Detroit Department of Transportation, or DDOT), the region consistently ranks poorly as a provider of public transit, especially in low-income communities.

WOODWARD LIGHT RAIL

The Woodward Light Rail project represents the first light rail mass transit project in the region, the first significant private investment in a public transportation project, and the first potentially sizable transit-oriented development benefit for Detroit’s downtown and midtown neighborhoods. Some envision the Woodward Light Rail as the spine of a more robust bus system that will benefit the neighborhoods. Others are focused on the potential benefits to real estate values and commercial/retail potential along Woodward Avenue.

The Woodward Light Rail initiative specifically seeks to address City policies and practices that hinder business development and success, as well as the informal policies that make borrowing difficult in an urban environment. It is not clear that any of the initiatives will focus on the quality of the jobs being created or what type of businesses are being supported (i.e., minority- and women-owned businesses).
There are a number of community development organizations and neighborhood associations in the target area that are partners in some of the initiatives; community advocates citywide have identified light rail as a top issue. Yet a public engagement process for the Woodward Corridor planning has been slow to emerge.

ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS BUY DETROIT

In addition to these projects, there are several other major initiatives in the Woodward Corridor and Greater Downtown area. One is the anchor institutions procurement project in the Woodward Corridor, which is part of the larger Buy Detroit strategy. This project aims to connect Midtown anchor institutions Detroit Medical Center, Henry Ford Health Systems, and Wayne State University—and potentially small and mid-sized purchasers in the future—with existing suppliers and procurers in the neighborhood, as well as to use the anchors’ purchasing power to attract suppliers to relocate into the city of Detroit. The initiative hopes to increase Detroit procurement from the current 5 percent levels at DMC, HFHS, and WSU toward 30 percent, focusing on food, facilities, and waste. Given that the combined budgets of the three institutions total some $6 billion, a 25 percent increase could inject an extra $1.5 billion annually into the local economy.25

The anchor institution initiative raises questions about workforce development policies because many workforce development programs focus solely on high growth industries, while many of the services that anchor institutions can source locally are in more traditional service industries (food, custodial services, waste disposal, etc.). Is it a disservice to be focusing resources on industries that often do not pay living wages? Should anchor institutions be using their leverage not just to steer business to local suppliers but to require those suppliers to pay living wages and offer benefits? To what extent should these institutions’ procurement policies be shaped to insure that women- and minority-owned businesses have opportunities in high-growth, high-margin areas of supply and not just in traditional service procurement?

Transit infrastructure in Southwest Detroit

Detroit is home to the nation’s busiest and most valuable land border crossing. Metro Detroit does over $150 billion of trade with Canada on an annual basis, virtually twice the value of the nation’s next busiest land crossing in Laredo, Texas and more than twice the value of trade crossings in Buffalo, New York, or San Diego, California. In addition to international border trade, the region’s manufacturing history makes it a hub for industrial transportation. While manufacturing has declined over the decades, industries’ supply chains, logistics, warehousing, and transportation have not. To the contrary, they are often described as some of Detroit’s strengths off of which it should build as it positions itself in a new global economy.

To accommodate this growth, a number of ambitious public infrastructure projects have been proposed over the past decade. The Detroit Intermodal Freight Terminal Project and New International Trade Crossing represent over $3 billion of investment in industrial transportation infrastructure in Southwest Detroit designed to capitalize on the region’s strategic border location.

NEW INTERNATIONAL TRADE CROSSING

The New International Trade Crossing (NITC) proposal is the result of more than a decade’s worth of planning about the capacity of the Detroit-Windsor border that concluded that a new bridge two miles south of the existing Ambassador Bridge in Southwest Detroit should be constructed. At the

time of this writing, a heated battle is playing out in Lansing and across Michigan over the authorizing legislation for a publicly owned second bridge connecting Detroit and Windsor. The NITC has the full support of every major industry in Michigan, the governments of Canada and Ontario, the U.S. federal government, Michigan’s Governor Rick Snyder, the Democrats in the Michigan Legislature, and many residents and community groups. Its primary opposition comes from billionaire Manuel “Matty” Moroun, who owns and operates the other major truck crossing, the Ambassador Bridge, as well as numerous trucking, warehousing, logistics, port operations, and related firms.

In Detroit, support for the NITC is largely tied to the opportunity for a new bridge to serve as an economic development tool wherein the local community receives actual benefit from hosting such a significant infrastructure project. It also is tied to fierce criticism of the Moroun family’s treatment of the city and neighborhood.26

DETROIT INTERMODAL FREIGHT TERMINAL

The Livernois Junction Yard, located at the intersection of Livernois and Wyoming in Southwest Detroit, is the site of a proposed consolidation in intermodal operations of three major railroads, to be called the Detroit Intermodal Freight Terminal (DIFT). A significant benefit of this project to rail operators would be infrastructure and efficiency improvements to local rail lines, which are among the busiest and most congested in the state. It is now in a funding limbo, with somewhat disengaged community stakeholders, and an uncertain future.

While major infrastructure investments like the DIFT could have significant economic benefits to the region, the negative effects of its operations for traffic, noise, environment, and other residential quality of life will be shouldered by the low-income population of Southwest Detroit. The agreements with the railroads to develop the project included significant funds to improve infrastructure surrounding the yard whose deterioration over the years has greatly harmed those who live near the yard.

Aerotropolis

Aerotropolis, a regional corporation, is the developer of the “Detroit Region Aerotropolis.” Envisioned as a master-planned development of 60,000 acres between the Willow Run Airport and the Detroit Metro Airport, it would be located approximately 30 miles from downtown Detroit, still within Wayne County, in the city of Romulus. The Aerotropolis concept is largely based on a theory being promoted by academics, such as John D. Kasarda, and others, that air-based transport and logistics centers will be hugely important economic drivers in the global economy.27 Kasarda explains that an Aerotropolis is “the urban incarnation of the physical Internet . . . [it] isn’t necessarily a city but a superconductor, a piece of infrastructure promising zero resistance to anyone wanting to set up shop there.”28

Leaders propose to use the Aerotropolis development as a logistics hub that will attract international transport.

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26 Examples of such treatment include the incident in 2001 when Moroun fenced off part of a public park near the base of the Ambassador Bridge. He posted signs that appeared to be from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) restricting access to the park. Yet, DHS claimed the signs were not its. Though a judge required Moroun to remove the fence, it took public action to bring the fence down. In June 2011, a Tea Party organization to which Moroun contributes posted fake eviction notices on the homes of Delray residents stating that they would be evicted if the government bridge is built.


businesses to the area. Some are concerned that this effort, planned at arms-length from efforts in Detroit, will pull investment away from downtown Detroit and its suburbs, essentially allowing people and goods to bypass the city altogether. Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano has said, “With aggressive implementation, our studies have shown that development of the Aerotropolis could create more than 60,000 jobs and generate billions in annual economic impact.”

These projects possess tremendous potential for job creation. No policy currently in place ensures that this potential will be realized with family-supporting jobs rather than low-wage ones. Political dynamics offer hope, though, including significant union involvement in NITC advocacy, the history of community benefits coalition-building in Southwest Detroit, and the emergence of community benefits as part of the discussion surrounding Woodward. The fact that all of these projects are public or involve a major public institution provides a key point of leverage for concerned community members. This pattern of public sector investment also serves as a powerful reminder of government’s importance in kick-starting a desperate economy.

“No policy currently in place ensures that this potential will be realized with family-supporting jobs rather than low-wage ones.”

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WHO CAN AND WILL MAKE CHANGE

Trying to create change in Detroit, in the wake of economic destruction and without the assets that enabled the building of the city to begin with, has been an enormous challenge. As local government loses its resources, its credibility and even its legal authority, its responsibility to serve the community by engaging it in crafting policy for the common good is moving increasingly to those sectors of society that have resources but lack direct democratic accountability. Where changing government systems seems like the path of most resistance to social change, many of these institutions are going a step beyond proposing policy to building alternatives to government systems. Many of these private institutions finding themselves in these awkward pseudo-governmental roles have attempted to create other mechanisms for public input and oversight, even absent the public’s ability to vote their leaders in or out.

Ideally, the challenge of replicating this aspect of government would be mitigated by a strong ecosystem of grassroots institutions, ready, willing, and able to organize constituencies to provide the needed input and oversight. Instead, Detroit’s grassroots institutions are in a state of decline, unable to mobilize their bases, shape public policy, and influence peers in the private or philanthropic sectors as they used to.

As a result, grassroots communities have largely given up on both these institutions and government as avenues for meeting their needs. Where government’s policymaking function is heavily supplemented by private institutions, its service provision function is being propped up to a breathtaking degree by unofficial volunteerism of residents.

Thus those working to improve life for Detroit’s communities remain “siloed” from each other at the movement, institutional, and government levels. The exception to this rule comes from the business community and the right side of the political spectrum, where leaders have found much success in shaping public policy and directing public resources to serve their agendas.

Grassroots groups building alternative systems

Many grassroots groups and other institutions advocate building alternative systems in order to bypass traditional avenues of change or to get something done without having to cope with a broken process, corruption, incompetence, or cronysim. Grassroots groups have the additional motivation of responding to the accusation that Detroiters were overly dependent on institutions.

For example, the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership was founded by activists Grace Lee Boggs and the late James Boggs. James Boggs was an autoworker, author, and leader of the radical wing of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Grace Lee Boggs was a feminist activist involved in radical movements since the 1940s. The Boggs philosophy criticizes other parts of the progressive agenda—for instance, community benefits and living wage laws. Ms.
Boggs says they are rooted in the current paradigm of thought—the aspiration of a middle-class sense of home, neighborhood, work, and community.

Another form of alternative system comes in the work of neighbors to supplement government services, documented well by Stephen Vogel and Tariq Abdullah of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture. This system takes many forms, including Citizen Band radio patrols with residents taking shifts and calling a base house when back-up or police or fire services are needed; using porch lights to supplement broken street lighting; growing experimentation with compacting toilets due to failing water and sewerage systems; volunteer demolition and repair of blighted buildings; and privately built and maintained parks and playgrounds, including those illegally placed on vacant lots. The more established these systems become, the stronger the resistance of community organizations to government efforts to “re-establish its preeminence as the provider to the masses.”

Greg Markus, co-founder of community organization Detroit Action Commonwealth and a professor of political science at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, explains why grassroots movements tend to eschew policy change or acquisition of mainstream power as goals: “We pick winnable issues . . . We train people to do it yourself. Don’t demand jobs from the mayor; he’s helpless. Instead, pursue entrepreneurialism . . . I don’t do grand strategies. I push in ten places and see what moves . . . Three months from now, there could be no city government. Too much is changing to develop a strategy. We’ll get free bus passes if we can, but we’d also better develop our own jitney cab service. You have to live off the land a lot in Detroit.”

Legacy institutions

These organizations were built by the great movements of the past and still hold tremendous influence. Many have stopped organizing and instead concentrate on defending their power, membership, status, and the narrowly defined interests of their members—often to the detriment of their ability to advocate for change and criticize political leaders. Some continue to organize in the face of obstacles.

Unions

Unions, especially the UAW, still have enormous influence over traditional politics in Michigan. The influence of the city’s unions has led to the election of some of the country’s most progressive members of Congress, from John Conyers to David Bonior. Internally, however, many unions are resistant to change, even in the face of declining numbers and density in the workforce.

The crisis for labor in Detroit became very evident during one of the bitterest strikes in recent U.S. labor history, at the Detroit News. In 1995, management of both Detroit newspapers—the News and the Detroit Free Press—put demands on the table which it knew would be unacceptable to unions. Four months before the strike started, the Detroit Newspaper Agency, a joint operation of both newspapers to share production and distribution facilities, promised to compensate the Sterling Heights Police Department for overtime costs shepherding scabs into the plant. By the time the strike was a year old, the newspapers had paid Sterling Heights $2.1 million. The strike became known nationally for its violence and for the use of heavily armed security guards who beat picketers. For Detroit

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unions, who had lived for decades in the shadow of the UAW and believed no employer could challenge a union successfully in the city, it was a bitter wake-up call. The results pleased the management of the Detroit papers. Frank Vega, CEO of Detroit Newspapers, said, “We would have waited three or four more contracts to get to where this strike has gotten us.”

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers (AFSCME) has suffered from declining political clout. Mayor Bing won the primary election in 2008 with the overwhelming support of the corporate establishment and the leadership of AFSCME, the largest city worker union. AFSCME gave him its support despite the fact that Bing openly stated his intention to force city workers to accept widespread contract concessions. On taking office he then proposed sweeping changes to union contracts, including wage cuts, reductions to longevity bonuses, overtime restrictions, and more. In presenting his 2010 city budget, Bing called for even further wage and benefit reductions, supported five to three by the city council. Those contract concessions were then imposed on the workers.

Churches

The clergy, especially the African American clergy, have traditionally—at least since the 1920s—played an important role in public and political affairs in Detroit. It has been common for senior pastors to be appointed to prominent positions on City commissions, run for office, or select potential candidates, notably through the powerful Council of Black Baptist Pastors. The Black Slate political action committee was created by a church called the Shrine of the Black Madonna.

As a congregation it has fielded effective poll workers, reminding people to vote down ticket, and persuaded members to walk their own precincts.

Additionally, political education in church continues to be a campaign mainstay. The Fannie Lou Hamer Political Action Committee, founded by the Reverend Wendell Anthony, has engaged in community education, holding forums and organizing around issues affecting black Detroit. Recent mayors (Coleman Young, Dennis Archer, and Kwame Kilpatrick) all recognized the importance of this group. They sought its support during their campaigns, but also paid attention to policy positions it held, especially on matters of education, public safety, and morality, including the contentious issue of gambling.

The city continued to suffer a loss of population and jobs, neighborhood decline and a reduction in services. In the 1990s, a very small number of churches became actively involved with housing development, business support, or broader economic development. Several churches have developed a capacity for effective community development, actively engaging in affordable housing, food programs, small business development, and even comprehensive neighborhood planning. Bishop Edgar Vann and his Second Ebenezer Church formed the Vanguard Community Development Corporation in the North End district of Detroit, creating a range of activities serving the residential and business community along the Interstate-I75 corridor. Like the leaders of other successful, larger, churches, he rebuilt his sanctuary as a full-service facility. Vann is also an example of one of the more influential pastors active with Mayor Bing’s administration.

32 Brown and Hartfield (2000) The Black Church Culture and Politics in the City of Detroit. CUS, WSU.
There are wide differences in the city between the largest churches that attract a congregation from across the city and the suburbs and the hundreds of small, underfunded, "storefront" churches, often with part-time clergy. The reality is that many of the more influential churches and their pastors are serving a citywide population, with little direct connection to the neighborhood location of the sanctuary. In addition, churches broadly are spoken of as having lost their organizing edge, neither building their bases nor delivering concrete gains for them. Churches' political power in Detroit is threatened also by suburban flight; many of the largest churches have members who are former city dwellers but now live—and vote—elsewhere.

**Institutions building alternative systems**

Another alternative strain is led by major institutions working to fill spaces left by both government and grassroots organizing and institutions.

The first phase of the **Detroit Works Project**, whose goal was to rewrite the City’s strategy for land use and service provision, represented an alternative existing City infrastructure in a number of ways. Its funding came from charitable foundations, including Kresge and Ford, instead of public sources. Its funding flowed through the nonprofit Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, instead of the City itself. Private company Hamilton Anderson and nationally recognized urban planner Toni Griffin provided technical expertise in addition to staff from the City’s Planning Commission and Planning and Development Department. Its civic engagement process relied on private for-profit and not-for-profit contractors, rather than City staff and typical City outreach and public meeting processes.

**Charter schools** appeal to the sensibility of scrapping old systems and starting fresh, setting aside government’s role to date. Those who advocate for this approach believe that increasing the school choices of parents and students improves educational outcomes, and that educational accountability should happen in the market through the choices of consumers. In Detroit, those advocating for choice see the creation of good schools for black and low-income students as their only objective, regardless of the governance structure of those schools. In turn, if private schools, or privately owned charter schools, can do a better job educating marginalized youth than the public school system, they believe, these are the schools that should be funded. Choice advocates are not attached to the idea of a public school system remaining intact. Instead, they are committed to creating a system of schools.

**Pragmatic business leaders**

Detroit’s business community and its leaders have changed dramatically over the past twenty years. With the exit of regional retailers from the city in the 1980s, the loss of all Detroit-headquartered banks in the 1990s and 2000s, the restructuring and downsizing of the automobile companies (with the possible exception of Dearborn-based Ford Motor Corporation), and the contraction of the real estate and development community, corporate capacity in the city and region has shrunk. In parallel, there has been a continuing suburbanization of businesses traditionally located in the city center: legal firms, finance, health care, and more. In 2011, the non-auto-related key businesses are utilities (DTE Energy), health systems (Henry Ford Health System, Detroit Medical Center/Vanguard, St. John’s Health System), health insurance companies (Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Michigan), and larger technology entrepreneurs such as Compuware and Quicken Loans.
Detroit’s new business leaders are often political insiders important to the futures of elected officials who need financial backing but who also need to deliver jobs and development to Detroit. Their involvement is exemplified by the **M-1 Rail project**, a precursor to Woodward Light Rail. M-1 Rail is a consortium of local business interests, especially those located in the central business and entertainment district downtown; the Midtown neighborhood just to the north, which contains Wayne State University, the Detroit Medical Center and other institutions; and the New Center neighborhood, which is located on the north edge of the project and contains Henry Ford Hospital, College for Creative Studies, and a large State Office Building complex located at the site of the former GM World Headquarters Building. The backers include former Compuware CEO Peter Karmanos, Quicken Loans Founder Dan Gilbert, Penske Corporation CEO Roger Penske, and Little Caesar’s, Detroit Tigers and Red Wings owner Mike Ilitch, who with others collectively put in $125 million. These leaders are also major political donors in the city. An additional $35 million came from the Kresge Foundation.

This private arrangement is novel in modern U.S. history, as municipal transportation systems have, for decades, been under public control and operation. M-1 leaders however, saw a common interest in their businesses’ proximity to downtown and Woodward and wanted to get the project jump-started so as to better facilitate movement between their investments.

The point person for M-1 Rail has been Matt Cullen, a former GM executive now working at Quicken Loans. Following tax incentives from the City, Quicken is in the process of consolidating and moving sizeable corporate operations to the heart of downtown Detroit from suburban Livonia and other sites throughout metro Detroit.

Though these business leaders remain active in Detroit politics, the story of **Detroit Renaissance** reveals an interesting shift in business priorities in recent years. A critical part of the anti-corporate tax lobby in Michigan is Business Leaders for Michigan. In the fall of 2009, Detroit Renaissance disbanded its original organization to form Business Leaders for Michigan. What had been an organization of the city’s business leaders focused on advocating for investment in downtown Detroit became a state-level organization whose priorities were in line with Republican small government principles: shrinking government budgets and scaling back business regulations. These principles were seen at work in the legislation moved in the first few months of Republican Governor Snyder’s term in 2011. Its urban agenda continues to call for incentives, policies, and funding that attract people to live downtown, attract business investments and develop mass transit along densely populated corridors.

Interestingly, the “do-it-yourself” movement of grassroots groups finds its business-world parallel in the current focus on entrepreneurship as the solution to Detroit’s economic problem. Much as residents do not want to rely for services on the government that has let them down, funders and policymakers do not want to rely for economic growth on large industry. Projects like the **New Economy Initiative** thus have focused significant resources on promoting entrepreneurship. As the embodiment of this vision, **Phil Cooley**, a former male model turned successful restaurateur, has become a popular pundit and spokesperson on the future of the city. And much as organizers and legacy institutions ask how nascent neighborhood efforts can ever achieve the numbers to change city politics, leaders and observers of economic policymaking are trying to figure out how small-scale entrepreneurs can become the basis for a new regional economy of millions of workers.

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33 The downtown area near Woodward includes businesses such as Compuware but also a plethora of entertainment and sporting venues such as Comerica Park (home of the Detroit Tigers), Ford Field (home of the Detroit Lions), the Fox Theatre, Detroit Opera House, Gem/Century, Music Hall, and others.

Ideological conservatives

Michigan’s conservative movement mostly works at the state level to reduce union power, erode living-wage jobs, balance budgets, and keep taxes low. It has been greatly energized by the national Tea Party Movement and successes in other states, such as Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin.

Following the election of Governor Snyder, Michigan’s Republican Party concentrated on quickly moving a variety of bills to shift power from the local to the state level, erode unionization, advance privatization, and shift the state’s tax responsibility from corporations to individuals by cutting corporate taxes while taxing pensions and shriveling the Earned Income Tax Credit. Mark Gaffney of the state’s AFL-CIO calls these moves “Wisconsin on the installment plan.”

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy serves as a key source of research and policy proposals for Michigan’s conservatives. The largest state-based free-market think tank in the United States, it lacks a progressive counterpart. It has produced innumerable reports and communication pieces on such ideas as reducing oversight of charter schools, privatizing Detroit’s public lighting, promoting merit pay for teachers, shortening the school year, advocating Detroit Public Schools’ takeover by an emergency manager, and cutting school funding to allow tax cuts for businesses. Many of these ideas are in evidence in existing policy or policy currently moving forward.

While Detroit’s corporate leaders show an increased focus at the state level, national level conservatives have turned their attention to Detroit. In June 2011, Americans for Prosperity, the Tea Party organization backed by the Koch brothers, admitted to posting fake eviction notices on the homes of southwest Detroiters. The neighborhood targeted is largely Latino and widely considered more likely to gain population than many of its more vacant peers. It is home to the U.S. end of the privately owned Ambassador Bridge and has suffered years of environmental and community degradation as a result. It is also home to some of the most robust community organizing in the city. Now that plans for a publicly owned competitor bridge appear to be moving forward, AFP aimed to drum up opposition to the new bridge through this scare tactic. Its campaign against the bridge has also included more than 100,000 direct mailings and 200 radio ads.

What’s missing?

As government loses funding and leaders, other sectors are relieving it of responsibilities that have gone unfulfilled for years. Foundations are funding land use visioning. Private charter school operators are taking over schools—and getting paid for it. Business leaders are putting up transit funding with the expectation of improving their bottom lines in the long run. And residents are providing basic services like lighting and sanitation for many neighborhoods. The critical question is how to sustain this level of contribution from all parties while bringing government back in to do what only it can do: provide democratic oversight in the interest of ensuring that common wealth is used for the broadest possible common good.

"In June 2011, Americans for Prosperity, the Tea Party organization backed by the Koch brothers, admitted to posting fake eviction notices on the homes of southwest Detroiters.”

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ECOSYSTEM

Detroiter are often accused of a problematic dependency on institutions—on private companies for jobs, on unions for representation, on government for services, and on civic institutions for strengthening community fabric. Quite the opposite is true, however. Detroiter and their institutions have fallen into a cycle of problematic independence from each other. Institutions that have forgotten how to engage base constituencies fulfill fewer and fewer of their basic obligations. Constituents have given up making demands while developing alternate structures that lack resources. The result is a disintegration of social infrastructure.

The implied accusation is that Detroiter have unrealistic expectations of salvation and are unwilling to save themselves. What can this received wisdom tell us, though, about how to build grassroots political infrastructure in Detroit? First, Detroiter have a strong attachment to an economy with a large middle class. The model and industries that will create this type of economy may be up for debate. But the widespread belief that broadly shared economic security is possible and should be the goal is a precious asset for grassroots organizers: something that people can stand for, instead of only and always standing against.

Both institutions and constituents must engage in active stewardship of Detroit’s rich legacy of social and economic justice. This requires movements of the scale that built this legacy in the first place. Detroit has a wealth of activity aiming to change its course for the better. What will it take for this activity to reach the threshold required to address its greatest challenges of economic and demographic decline?

This will require the creation of collective power. Dr. Susan J. Schurman, Rutgers professor and founding president of the National Labor College, notes that power-building efforts often fall prey to a conflation of two distinct forms of collective power:

One form is called by sociologists “extensive” power—it is people acting together based on common beliefs and values. It has no geographic boundaries. The various evangelical movements and the anti-globalism movement are examples of people using extensive power.

The other form is called “intensive” – it is when people build institutions to harness their collective power more specifically on a shared agenda. Institutions almost always have boundaries (jurisdictions) of some kind—geographic, sectarian, and so forth.

This conflation accompanies competing academic theories that change is initiated from the top down (elites creating a favorable context for organizing) versus that its genesis is bottom up (constituents

“Detroiter and their institutions have fallen into a cycle of problematic independence from each other.”
lose faith in elites and organize to demand change). Schurman argues, "History says [that] we cannot mobilize workers' power to create a better life for all workers unless we build a great movement [and] we cannot sustain the gains we achieve unless we build great organizations—not just labor organizations but also government organizations . . . [to] enshrine them as the new status quo and defend them from those who would undo them."

In other words, movements must build institutions and institutions must build movements, and together they must invest in shaping government policy and structures to realize their agendas. This symbiotic relationship is what ultimately constitutes a vibrant civic and political life in a democratic society. Manuel Pastor and Rhonda Ortiz (of the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California) lay out ten key elements for social movement builders that can serve as metrics of the health of that symbiosis:

1. A vision and a frame
2. An authentic base in key constituencies
3. A commitment to the long haul
4. An underlying and viable economic model
5. A vision of government and governance
6. A scaffold of solid research
7. A pragmatic policy package
8. A recognition of the need for scale
9. A strategy for scaling up
10. A willingness to network with other movements

Applying these metrics to Detroit’s civic engagement ecosystem reveals a mix of strengths, potentialities, and challenges.

**Assets**

Detroit has a number of strengths to build with: grassroots organizing, networks, and a culture of civic engagement. Large constituencies that were dominant in past generations remain formally assembled in institutions like unions, nonprofit organizations and churches. And some of these constituency-based institutions are recognizing the need to change.

**Informal and nascent organizing**

Organizing at the most grassroots level—absent formal institutions—is taking place in a variety of communities and settings, such as neighbors organizing to provide their own services from street lighting to vigilante justice. Emerging identity-based constituencies are also organizing. Latinos, Arab Americans, members of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender community, suburban residents of color, and former prisoners represent bases of power that were not part of sociopolitical dynamics a generation ago.

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37 Ibid., slide 13 notes.
Legacy institutions

Complementarily, large portions of constituencies that were dominant in past generations remain formally assembled in institutions like unions and churches. Although many of these institutions are not currently organizing, the sheer existence of these formal membership bodies represents a tremendous potential for activation by the right leadership—leadership from the bottom or the top. And some of these constituency-based institutions are recognizing the need to change, whether by organizing their own members, by organizing new members, or by engaging with new allies. In addition to these membership organizations, Detroit’s history of personal and corporate wealth and concomitant charitable giving has given rise to a profusion of nonprofit organizations: social service providers, issue advocates, and community development corporations.

Pro-community public policies

Unions, churches, and nonprofits are not the only legacies of twentieth-century movements. Detroit’s city government itself creates a number of institutional structures that could serve as vehicles for movement building. Citizens’ district councils are an excellent example. Another is Detroit’s living wage policy, which was passed by the voters, upheld by the City Council, budgeted for two enforcement positions, and thwarted by the mayor, who never filled the positions. Yet another is the all-black, all-Democratic City Council, which should be a sympathetic place for predominantly black and Democratic communities to seek allies and resources. Dozens of academics have values and research interests that ally them with movement building.

Networking

Networking is an essential strategy for achieving scale in a context where so many organizing efforts are highly targeted and small scale. The willingness to network is evident and no small accomplishment given that Detroit is immune neither to scarcity-driven nonprofit turf battles nor to deep-rooted tensions among neighborhoods and identity groups. In assessing the strength of networking in Detroit, two challenges surface. First, relatively few of the networks cross movement boundaries; most are issue-based. Second, those that do cross these boundaries rarely achieve a deeper commitment than networking and coordination on one campaign at a time. Missing from the scene are long-term, strategic alliances committed to sharing significant resources toward broader goals. This is in part a logical outgrowth of the dearth of a vision that engenders solidarity.

Culture of engagement

Detroit is no stranger to noisy democracy. The raucousness of meetings is the subject of frequent chagrin by meeting organizers. Though an excess of confrontation can interfere with community engagement in policymaking, its absence can be equally or more devastating to movements for change.

Areas for capacity building

What prevents these potentialities from turning into strengths, and these strengths from combining toward transformative social change? Detroit’s challenges can be found in the elements related to vision of economy and governance, research and policy agendas, and networking.
Compelling popular vision of the economy and government

Articulating a vision that feels both realistic and worth fighting for is a daunting task given the gravity of Detroit’s situation. Movement builders’ approaches to this task fall roughly into three categories: first, building new economic and governance systems entirely independent of mainstream systems; second, defending existing systems which have served communities and workers well; and, third, demanding that emergent mainstream systems benefit communities as well as or better than the declining ones did. By contrast, policy and government elites are proposing new systems: new economic development, new physical layouts of the city, new ways for government to deploy its resources.

What is communities’ counter vision to the new economy and creative class? To the mothballing of neighborhoods to consolidate shrinking populations? Movement builders face a significant challenge in developing a vision of government and governance. Today the rhetoric of rightsizing government dominates a national movement to shrink government. Though this movement functions to decrease accountability and services, it finds fuel in anti-government sentiment earned by the corruption and incompetence that have plagued Detroit. Having hope for government to play a positive role in communities is a tough sell.

Detroiters are loath to think big and be let down again. Nowhere is this challenge greater than in education. Current leadership in the city, region, and state has articulated a clear vision of market-based education in which choice and competition among traditional public schools, between these schools and charters, and between public employees and private subcontractors achieves better results. What is the equally compelling vision of the other side? What is the alternative frame that appeals equally to both common sense and the yearning for immediate and drastic improvement in the school system?

Similarly, on land use, how can Detroit deal with the multiple consequences of a shrunken population without reliving the ravages of past urban renewal projects and other abuses? And, perhaps toughest of all, what will take the automobile industry’s place in providing not just any jobs, and not just corporate prosperity, but jobs at the foundation of an economy of shared prosperity?

Grassroots-led policy agenda

On par with the challenge of crafting a compelling and attainable vision is crafting effective and winnable policy agendas. In the wake of the release of detailed research on the prevalence and location of vacant property in Detroit, and with the advent of the nonprofit Data Driven Detroit, the use of data to inform policy positions has gained importance in Detroit’s debates. Yet there is a shortage of institutions with the capacity to popularize research and data in a way that clearly and directly explains their significance for issues named by communities. Moreover, there is a shortage of community-oriented think tanks with the capacity to develop broad, large-scale policy. Absent policy solutions to advocate, community members are left with little choice but to engage in the kind of vitriol and diatribes that have come to characterize forums like school board meetings and Detroit Works Project town halls.

In sum, Detroit is a place with a great amount of civic activity. The irony is that activity does not result in change—in movements with unified goals, policy wins, and institutions to enshrine both. Planning fatigue feeds immobilization. Trying something new where it feels like everything has been tried requires unusual audacity and energy. And yet new initiatives are emerging constantly. What will make initiatives more likely to build the grassroots political ecosystem that can tangibly change Detroiters’ lives?
STRATEGIES

It’s undeniable—Detroit has enormous potential for powerful grassroots movements to build political infrastructure that puts residents in charge. Deep and authentic organizing takes place neighbor-to-neighbor, co-worker-to-co-worker, and parent-to-parent. Constituencies that tend to favor democratic accountability and social and economic justice are emerging, growing, organizing, moving, and shifting balances of power. Huge bases are convened through nonprofit service providers, community development corporations, and the great democratic institutions built in the twentieth century: unions, churches, and political and civic organizations. Many of these institutions are reawakening to the possibility of going beyond serving their members to organizing them. Many policies, structures, and officials in city government favor social and economic justice. Coalition activity abounds. Civic culture favors perseverance and speaking truth to power.

So how can Detroiter leverage strengths to address weaknesses and access potential? In short, grassroots movements and institutions committed to the same goals must band together to lay claim to the big job of solving Detroit’s most pressing problems. And they must bring government on board as their most powerful tool. We offer nine observations about institutional strategies that have the greatest potential to take Detroit beyond business as usual: techniques for institutions to grow and connect with social movements, strengthen their own organizational capacity, and lay claim to public policy and public resources on behalf of communities.

For each strategy, we offer one or two examples of how organizations on the ground—nonprofits, labor unions, and others—are practicing that strategy. These are fuller descriptions of the brief points contained in the Executive Summary. The examples are meant to be illustrative of the strategies, not an exhaustive account—nor even a top ten list—of all the good social change work taking place in the region. Many efforts have significantly changed course during this project and thus some examples describe recent work rather than current work.

Strengthen movements

1. Articulate broad vision

Bring key leaders and constituencies together around defining a shared vision that creates a sense of movement and long-term relationships, not just tactically motivated coalitions. Take this opportunity to position grassroots stakeholders and their institutions as propositional—proposing effective policy solutions—rather than only oppositional. Where advocates of alternative systems have articulated a compelling vision, how can this be translated into change for existing public systems? How can it be practiced at a scale large enough to demonstrate its viability as an alternative approach? Where resources being brought into Detroit need to be distributed equitably, how can advocates of equity counter their image of opposition and share the work of and the credit for bringing these benefits?

URBAN AGRICULTURE

Few topics have gained as much attention over the past year as urban farming in Detroit. With thousands of acres of vacant land, a dwindling population, and a lack of traditional sources of economic development, new large-scale urban farming initiatives are poised to contribute to Detroit’s rich landscape of community-based urban farming. While many of the leaders of Detroit’s community
“Urban farmers are articulating a vision which encompasses land use, economic development, community development, environmental improvement, and reduced obesity through changes in diet and exercise—all in one.”

garden movement point to the community development benefits of community gardens, the push for more urban farming projects arises from the convergence of objectives from many different fields. Environmentalists promote local food production as a way to cut down on the environmental costs of food transportation. Food justice advocates commonly refer to Detroit as a food desert, a place where residents don’t have access to fresh and nutritious food; urban farms that produce and sell food locally address this predicament. Still others see urban agriculture as a significant economic development tool, turning vacant City-owned land to productive use, removing blight, creating jobs, and producing food to be sold commercially. Urban farmers are articulating a vision which encompasses land use, economic development, community development, environmental improvement, and reduced obesity through changes in diet and exercise—all in one. Urban agriculture is a prime example of grassroots communities being propositional, although the scale of impact of this proposition remains to be seen.

EXTRACTING VALUE FROM THE WASTE STREAM

The coalition Zero Waste Detroit has formed to advocate recycling as an alternative to incineration that extracts value from the waste stream. Zero Waste Detroit includes Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, East Michigan Environmental Action Council, Bioneers, MOSES, the Michigan Environmental Council, the Sierra Club, and Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision. The effort is an interesting example of reframing an issue from oppositional to propositional and environmental concerns from being a job-killer to being an economic boon. All the reframing in the world, however, is not likely to bridge a key gap: support for the incinerator by the Operating Engineers, who represent its employees. This tension brings to the fore the importance of thinking not just about job generation but about job quality.

Architectural Salvage Warehouse similarly takes Detroit’s vacant buildings and reframes them from being waste and an affliction to an opportunity for resource extraction—in this case, not coal or oil but scrap metal and reusable lumber. Detroit’s scrappers do the same illicitly.

2. Organize

Organizing is distinct from civic engagement and from self-help, although it can and should build on both. Organizing develops the leadership of stakeholders—putting them in positions of organizational power—to identify root causes, craft real policy solutions, and act collectively to bring those solutions to fruition. Organizing in Detroit must aim to achieve solution-orientation, not perpetually trade on anger and rejection of the mainstream. Noisy democracy and public confrontation can be used tactically as part of broader campaign strategies to advance change.

New organizing in the city—outside of the legacy institutions—also has yet to achieve scale sufficient to affect policy citywide and beyond. The challenge that newer organizing groups face is to do so without becoming merely mass mobilization machines. Too many grassroots institutions of the twentieth century failed to strike this delicate balance between breadth of membership and depth and authenticity of member leadership. Too many newer organizing groups have yet to strike it. To take this kind of organizing to scale requires years of work and Detroit’s newer groups are starting out. Mechanisms of democratic oversight like elected organizational boards are necessary for this kind of leadership but not sufficient. A robust program of leadership development must ensure that member leaders are not relegated to a rubber stamp role due to lack of technical expertise in policy or the strategy of the organization.
HARRIET TUBMAN CENTER/OUR KIDS COME FIRST

The mission of the Harriet Tubman Center, directed by Bill O’Brien, is to recruit and develop community organizers. One of their initiatives is Our Kids Come First, an organization of parents that works on a range of community issues that affect youth. OKCF chapters are largely organized through the Local School/Community Organizations (LSCO) of individual schools in Southwest Detroit. OKCF has historically worked on safe neighborhoods, employment, and transportation, and has had success running campaigns to demolish dangerous abandoned houses and increase police patrols. Their work on education has led to a five-point platform: (1) Early teacher assignment to schools (this year permanent teachers were still not in place at many schools as late as the second semester), (2) the creation of a college readiness tracker, (3) influence over the design of a new school, (4) a say in future charter management selection in Southwest, and (5) increased bilingual access. The Tubman Center is also engaging young people in organizing through their Youth Voice initiative. Thus far this organizing has focused on neighborhood violence. OKCF is largely focused on trying to find a foothold within the current power and policy structure, rather than overturning it. Some feel that the Tubman Center’s organizing should go deeper with constituents, making itself more accountable to its base by bringing members further into organizational leadership and agenda-setting. The breadth of Tubman’s goals is certain, however: in 2011, the organization began to recruit support to create a new citywide community organization whose coalition would have capacity to mobilize 10,000 people.

DETROIT PARENT NETWORK

The Detroit Parent Network is an organization that “works to improve parent involvement in education by offering workshops, practical tools, written materials and leadership development, all designed to build a constituency of powerful parents for change.” DPN focuses on helping parents through personal development and leadership development. In February 2010 DPN was contracted by DPS to increase parental involvement. As a part of the contract, DPN is responsible for establishing and managing eight Parent Resource Centers throughout the city. These service centers offer parents education and training, including computer classes, GED classes, academic toolkits, employment opportunities, and English language development. Some have described the DPN approach not as community organizing but as outreach and civic engagement of parents, noting that DPN focuses on the education and participation of individual parents but not facilitating a process for them to generate a shared policy agenda and build collective power to attain these. DPN has elected not to focus on Detroit Public Schools’ recent, high-profile controversies around mass school closures and whether governance would reside with the elected Board or appointed Emergency Manager or shift to the mayor of Detroit. Another view described DPN as having the potential to replace ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) in its scale of grassroots organizing in Detroit.

MICHIGAN ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE

The Michigan Organizing Collaborative is emerging as an effort predicated on the principle that a shift in the policy direction of the state will require a permanent, long-term alliance of cross-silo, base-building groups committed to organizing as a tactic to create shared campaigns that can win significant, state-level change. In its concept paper, MOC describes “a broadly shared agenda for renewal for Michigan that ties together the interests of revitalizing Detroit, Flint and other devastated urban communities, with the overall economic revival of the state.” MOC is led by Rick Carter of FACT (Flint Area Congregations Together), the Flint affiliate of PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing), and Bill O’Brien of the Tubman Center, who came out of local and national work for the Gamaliel organization. MOC has been meeting since the first half of 2010 and engaged a

http://www.detroitparentnetwork.org/about
couple dozen groups along the way. In a context where organizations stretched thin and fighting for
turf fall often and easily out of collaborative work, MOC has committed to shared priority-setting,
flexible requirements for commitments of resources by members, avoiding turf wars, and passing
resources through to member groups.

SEIU FIGHT FOR A FAIR ECONOMY

Detroit was one of the first cities to come online under the door-to-door organizing component of
the Service Employees International Union’s broad campaign to reframe the economic crisis. The
local 501(c)(4) organization, Good Jobs Now Detroit (GJN), planned to build the largest such advoca-
cy group in Detroit to focus on jobs and vacant housing, said SEIU Healthcare Michigan Political
Director Bob Allison. This is an effort to take organizing to scale with a new, neighborhood-based
constituency. One hundred and thirty canvassers would spend five weeks on the ground with com-
munity action surveys asking residents about issues and actions that they will do such as house par-
ties and phone calls to neighbors. Permanent staff funded through the same time next year would
organize leads identified by canvassers, aiming to build a network of neighborhood captains, and
handle field communications and new media. Neighborhood meetings featuring elected officials and
pastors as speakers have supported the effort and GJN has also begun coalition outreach to social
service organizations.

This activity builds toward a series of flashpoint actions planned every month or two. GJN’s aims
to name corporate villains, creating a political wind against their agenda and in favor of a broadly
defined vision of a fair economy. It will not create its own policy agenda. Allison explained, “We don’t
need to figure out the answers—they [the elected officials] do. That’s why we elected them . . . When
you start getting into that, it’s too easy for it [the agenda] to be picked apart. We are trying to build a
movement, not a solution-based campaign.”

3. Bridge key constituencies

The region’s demographics should work for, not against, those aiming to build power for grassroots
communities. Though divisions among constituencies are deep and real, every constituency has its
boundary crossers. These leaders can be equipped with an understanding of the history behind divi-
sions and statistics and a narrative to explain how unity and solidarity are more than nice ideas—they
are hard-nosed necessities to win.

LATINO SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

A large proportion of Latino-led organizations focus on services; community development groups
in the district remain largely white-led. In addition to Latino Family Services, the Hispanic
Development Corporation and Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development (LA SED)
are recognized as prominent Latino-led organizations. Groups engaged in organizing related to the
New International Trade Crossing represent a very important opportunity to grow resources toward
building power for this community of color. Centro Obrero, an unfunded nonprofit directed by
Detroit School Board member Elena Herrada, seeks to provide equal protection for citizens of the
United States and for immigrant workers by defending workers’ rights, addressing workplace abuses,
organizing labor unions, and educating workers on community issues that affect their lives. The new
council-by-districts may include a Latino seat, meaning that it will be crucial for this community to
have a strong pipeline for effective political leadership as well as the capacity to hold that leadership
accountable.
ACCESS

Metropolitan Detroit has the largest Arab American community in the world outside of the Middle East. The Arab American community centered in southwest Detroit and neighboring Dearborn has followed a similar trajectory, with its flagship organization being Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS). In addition to providing services, however, ACCESS has cultivated relationships with the United Auto Workers, touting the history of Arab Americans in establishing the union and its Arab Workers Caucus in the 1970s. ACCESS’s advocacy and civic engagement specialist, Rachid Elabed, won this year’s Organizer of the Year award at the Michigan Summit. The Arab American community is sufficiently geographically spread out that growing its electoral power may prove a challenge.

ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER AMERICAN VOTE—MICHIGAN

Whereas Arab Americans can claim long roots in the region, the major growth of the broader Asian and Pacific Islander community has been a more recent phenomenon with Chinese, Hmong and South Asian immigrants fueling the bulk of the increase. Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote—Michigan (APIA Vote) has emerged to promote the civic engagement of this community. This new organization runs primarily on volunteer time; paid staff time has focused on annual public opinion surveying of the community around issues including translated ballots, comprehensive immigration reform, and redistricting. APIA Vote held its first fundraising dinner in June 2011.

LESBIAN/GAY/BISEXUAL/TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

The growth of a community’s power can often be measured by its selection of issues. Though Michigan’s LGBT leadership names the full gamut of issues among its priorities, the campaign receiving particular attention from allies in the progressive community is against discrimination in housing and employment. This issue is perceived as a more basic issue, palatable to moderates, that for other LGBT movements has been a precursor to efforts around marriage equality. Michigan voters passed Proposition 2 in 2004. More comprehensive than anti-gay marriage measures like California’s Proposition 8, Proposition 2 even outlawed domestic partnerships. The state penal code still criminalizes sodomy. In March 2011, a bill to stop the provision of domestic partner benefits to State employees failed in the House with union opposition. Equality Michigan, recently formed through a merger of the Triangle Foundation and Michigan Equality, is the new statewide organization at the helm of this fight. After a ballot win on the nondiscrimination issue in Kalamazoo, the movement will be going after similar local ordinances in a handful of other cities in the near term. This campaign can help to build a stronger statewide infrastructure for future legislative battles.

Strengthen institutions

4. Link movements to institutions and vice versa

Institutions can seek ways to lend resources to burgeoning movements. They can provide meeting, event or office space; staff time; technical and policy expertise; spots in trainings; endorsements for events; fiscal sponsorship; connections to decision-makers; leadership opportunities; the all-important monetary donations; and more. Movements can reciprocate by seizing these opportunities, engaging in dialogue about vision and agenda, translating the significance of institutions’ agendas for the movement’s vision and principles, and turning out to actions.

“Institutions can seek ways to lend resources to burgeoning movements.”
UNITED AUTO WORKERS’ GIMME FIVE INITIATIVE

Beginning his term in June 2010, international president Bob King has brought a new kind of leadership to the UAW. King has a progressive history and has brought the union to the table with the rest of the labor movement in rallying against anti-union and budget-cutting legislation in Lansing and Detroit. He describes his approach as reinvigorating social unionism. The Gimme Five program is an effort to infuse this spirit throughout the membership. Through volunteering five hours in each of four areas, members earned buttons and contributed to their regions’ efforts to win recognition for the most participation. The four areas are organizing for new UAW members (without which, King believes, the UAW’s days are numbered), solidarity with other Gimme Five-approved workers’ rights efforts, political action, and recruiting others into the Gimme Five program.

WE ARE THE PEOPLE

We Are the People is a brand-new, well-resourced statewide labor-progressive coalition; it is the place where labor has come to fight the current Republican tide in Lansing. Most of the multi-thousand-person rallies in spring 2011 were coordinated out of We Are the People. SEIU Healthcare Michigan Political Director Bob Allison described it as “labor coming together like never before.” The energy is sufficient to drive talk of We Are the People forming the basis for the much-needed progressive think tank to counter such organizations as Mackinac. In addition to mobilizations, We Are the People’s nascent field operation consisted of twenty canvassers and four organizers going on a six-week blitz in four pilot project areas to build chapters of the state organization. We Are the People hopes to capture populist anger—even Tea Party members who have been alienated by Governor Snyder’s move to increase taxes on retirees. At the time of research, no specific issues had been selected for the base getting built beyond the series of actions that had already taken place around statewide legislation. The concept instead was to create an overarching message that can be a banner for any issues and initiatives that want to associate themselves with it.

URBAN AGRICULTURE

The urban agriculture movement discussed above for the breadth of its vision is also interesting because it is where Detroit’s strong separatist and survivalist urges are bubbling up into the mainstream. Land use policies restricting agricultural activities place urban farmers in a position of needing to change “the system”—rather than just ignore it—but two factors seem to have slowed its maturation into a deeper engagement with proactively changing public policy and power beyond its immediate issue areas. First, the main public policies at hand place urban agriculturalists in an oppositional position—fighting against regulations that would stop what they are doing. Second, enforcement of these regulations has been limited because of the popularity or trendiness of the movement and because the city government is not yet ready to propose new regulations absent a broader land use strategy. Nonetheless, the City’s creation of a Food Policy Council and the fact that candidates for office are coming out of the movement⁴⁰ suggest that it may have a longer-term toehold inside government.

5. Build capacity for research and policy development

These capacities are indispensable for anyone trying to move from vision to a winning strategy to tangible outcomes. Civic engagement infrastructure must include think tanks that can define problems

⁴⁰One high-profile example is the Michigan Small Farmer of the Year for 2011, Harvesting Earth Educational Farm in a suburb of Flint. The first urban farm to receive the award, this farm is also a karate dojo started by African American former prisoner Jackie King and his wife, Dora, on a double vacant lot. King has run for state legislature. In an interesting illustration of the survivalist philosophy of many urban farmers, the Kings refer to their endeavor as “urban self defense.”
and craft solutions from the perspective of grassroots stakeholders and in partnership with those who understand political dynamics. No matter how loud the community’s voice is, unless it has the means in its own hands to analyze policy and propose alternatives, it will always be dependent upon those who do. This capacity must encompass not only high-level problems and solutions but also tactical research to ensure that campaign goals are practical and high-impact. Organizations outside Detroit can be utilized as resources in a way that holds them accountable to those on the ground.

DETOUR VACANT PROPERTY CAMPAIGN

The mission of the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign (DVPC) is to assist in the productive use or re-use of vacant property in Detroit. DVPC is a multi-year partnership led by Community Legal Resources (CLR) with partnership from Detroit Local Initiatives Support Corporation (Detroit LISC), community groups, neighborhood associations, city residents, faith-based organizations, the University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD), the City of Detroit, and the Kresge Foundation. The DVPC empowers Detroit communities with the resources and strategies to address vacant properties. Specifically, DVPC works by (1) assisting local community organizations and neighborhood associations in developing and implementing vacant property plans; (2) providing CDCs, neighborhood associations, block clubs, residents, churches, businesses, and others a “toolbox” of strategies to address vacant property problems as well as assistance with specific technical requests and small grants to offset costs of do-it-yourself vacant property maintenance and security initiatives; and (3) helping local and state policymakers create systems and expand the tools available to address Detroit’s vacant property crisis. Though DVPC’s role has not been to engage residents in changing policy, assisting them to understand and use policy expertly is a critical building block. Actually using policy tools will allow residents to develop a specific critique and ideas for improvement in relation to their personal experiences.

6. Develop leaders

Leadership development, also discussed as part of the strategy of organizing, serves a variety of critical functions. We must be clear that leadership abilities do not discriminate and there is no shortage of talent in Detroit. What does follow lines of class and privilege is the time to lead one’s community and the access to resources to match innate talent with learned skills. As those who had the time and resources have left—block club heads, Girl Scout troop leaders, local school/community organizers, shop stewards, and deacons—leadership development is what will create successors. Leadership development programs also create space to do much of the work described above: build long-term relationships; create a vision; retell history in a way that encourages action instead of stifling it; convene boundary-crossers; and foster a movement culture of solidarity, solution-orientation, and perseverance in the hard work of organizing.

Lastly, as new academic and think tank research on Detroit continues to emerge, leadership development has a particular role to play. First, popular education as part of leadership development can facilitate community members’ contribution of their experiences and analysis of Detroit’s challenges to the body of shared knowledge. Second, in order for grassroots stakeholders to participate equally and constructively in addressing those challenges, they must have access to the same information as policymakers; leadership development is a critical medium for that access.

DEMOCRACY ALLIANCE—COMMITTEE ON STATES

Major political donors formed the Democracy Alliance in 2005 to pool money to fund field campaign infrastructure in key swing states. In Michigan, those around the table include the United Auto
Workers, SEIU, the Michigan Education Association, and the Michigan Association for Justice. Its approach to candidate development will be modelled after one led in Wisconsin by the teachers’ association, Citizen Action, and SEIU, where a comprehensive database of elected and appointed officials at all levels of government was created. Database members were then surveyed to identify those who shared values of the collaboration; those individuals were brought to policy forums and engaged in training. In Michigan, the hope is that this work can help to coordinate the activities of other candidate pipeline organizations such as Progressive Majority, EMERGE, Emily’s List, and the Democratic Party.

BUILDING MOVEMENT PROJECT

Nationally, the Building Movement Project (BMP) is a network of individual partners exploring different facets of making the nonprofit community more oriented toward advancing the movement for progressive social change. In Detroit, Building Movement Project partner Linda Campbell has been supporting community organizing in the North End for years via strategic and planning support for Storehouse of Hope and Greater Woodward Community Development Corporation. Her work with BMP includes co-authoring manuals explaining a step-by-step process for how to engage service-provision nonprofits in social change work, which she piloted in Detroit. This raises the potential to tap into the region’s vast nonprofit infrastructure as a force for grassroots power. Getting beyond 501(c)(3)s to other pieces of Detroit’s grassroots infrastructure is key, however, to building any effort’s efficacy. The Detroit work has drawn on BMP’s national work using a frame of “the commons” to talk about why stakeholders should care about government accountability on issues like revenue options for budgets, responsible contracting, and community benefits.

Engage with government

The public sector by nature constitutes the largest pool of resources subject to broad democratic control. In order to bring significant change in the lives of constituents, social movements and their institutions must prioritize efforts to use this common wealth for the common good.

Though not discussed extensively in this report, collective bargaining agreements represent another instance in which significant resources are subject to democratic control. The enfranchised stakeholders in this case are a more narrowly-defined group than in the case of the public sector. Nonetheless, this venue also offers the opportunity to utilize the power of the many to redirect sizable resources to benefit the many.

7. Take on the big issues

Detroit has major policy changes in process. Massive resources are being invested by government, philanthropy and business to influence the outcomes of these processes. Their outcomes will determine how massive public resources will be allocated for decades to come. Community members contemplating a role in the process find their resources to be no match for those of other players and focus instead on issues that are more immediate, local and winnable. This leaves resources on the table. Grassroots players must seek points of leverage—points where the rules of the process require a public decision or otherwise amplifying the power of the community—that make big change winnable.
through meaningful community engagement in the creation of sustainable ‘win-win’ development strategies.” Groups have united “to advance effective and equitable economic development that will create good jobs while ensuring a healthy, safe environment for all communities.” It hopes to work with existing economic development projects to expand the pie so that they benefit those who traditionally have been left out of the old economic model. D4 formed in 2010 out of several efforts that were aligned with the coalition’s work. Its campaigns include community benefits for the New International Trade Crossing and associated development and for the $30 million in federally funded weatherization programs to be run through the Southeast Michigan Regional Energy Office. D4 is also expected to be a key player in seeking community benefits in the Woodward light rail project. Its food justice campaign, discussed below, seeks to use the City’s liquor licensing process as an opportunity to enforce labor and public health laws.

BRIGHTMOOR ALLIANCE

The Brightmoor Alliance serves the Brightmoor neighborhood, a district with large amounts of vacant land near the northwestern edge of Detroit. It represents individual residents and organizational members from the social service, faith, neighborhood association, educational, community development, and small business sectors. Brightmoor is supported through the Skillman Foundation Good Neighborhoods program and has had its programmatic priorities shaped by that involvement. Around town, it is largely associated in people’s minds with the leadership of the Reverend Jerome Warfield of Mt. Vernon Missionary Baptist Church and Brightmoor executive director Kirk Mayes. Mayes received media coverage in April 2011 for comments that likely cuts to the city budget would hit his neighborhood hard, demonstrating (along with Brightmoor’s engagement in the Detroit Works Project process) that this organization is watching the big issues.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS

The People’s Movement Assembly started as a collaboration of Detroiters involved with the 2010 United States Social Forum that took place in the city. PMA quickly focused on providing a shadow Detroit Works Project to generate a community-driven alternative to the City’s plan, explicitly in opposition to the idea of rightsizing the city. Though the PMA has been very clear that its goal is to generate an alternative vision, its rejection of participation in the Detroit Works Project official forums as a method to promote that vision led to skepticism regarding its impact. Environmental justice participants in the PMA, however, decided to participate in the Detroit Works Project summit on the environment on May 5 for the purpose of getting on record with their views. This choice represents an interesting move to bridge the desire to remain rooted in popular movements that value dissidence and opposition to “the system” while seeking ways that these movements might alter the course of government-sponsored civic engagement, rather than only opposing it.

8. Prioritize campaigns to increase government accountability

Detroit is caught in a spiral of policies and efforts to move important resources and decisions out of the realm of direct public oversight and accountability. Policies that create new points of leverage—checks and balances and opportunities for communities to shape decisions—have never been more important. As local governments lose their funding and authority to the state level in Michigan,

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41 D4 powerpoint provided by Karen Tyler Ruiz, Senior Director of Financial Stability at the United Way of Southeastern Michigan, not available for public distribution.

it becomes increasingly important for locally focused activists to understand policy and build power
and strategies at the state level. Additionally, communities can include enforcement provisions in
policy proposals and invest in watchdogging via implementation oversight bodies and partnerships
with implementers such as unions or subcontracted nonprofits. They can also become involved in the
technical issues of keeping a provision funded and maintain a capacity to litigate when necessary. Lack
of implementation has been the graveyard for too many social justice victories in Detroit.

CAMPAIGN FOR LIQUOR LICENSING RESPONSIBILITY (CLLR)—DOING
DEVELOPMENT DIFFERENTLY IN DETROIT

The CLLR (pronounced “clear”) campaign aims simply to create an additional point of leverage over
all businesses with liquor licenses—markets and restaurants, primarily. As such, it is also of interest
to UFCW, UNITE HERE, and neighborhood advocates. In a city grappling with the absence of any
major chain grocery stores and a lack of access to fresh food, this policy could prove to be highly
instrumental for influencing businesses that sell liquor and could sell fresh food. However, it will need
to protect itself against the fate that has befallen many policies—with the living wage being a notable
good example—that have been passed and never implemented, either deliberately undermined or simply
lost in the struggling municipal government.

EFFORTS AGAINST THE EMERGENCY MANAGER LAW

Michigan Forward is a one-person operation whose previous efforts have centered on translating the
significance of key policy items for urban centers like Detroit through media like YouTube videos.
It has positioned itself at the head of a “Campaign to Build Michigan” coalition including Rainbow
Push and the AFL-CIO to create referenda to overturn Michigan’s new emergency manager law,
which lowered the barriers for state government to put a local government in receivership and
expanded the powers of receivers.

Litigation is also being used as a tool to overturn the emergency manager law. Sugar Law Center filed
a state lawsuit in June on behalf of twenty-eight individuals; Detroit Public Schools employees have
taken the matter to federal court.

9. Prioritize producing tangible outcomes

As every organizer knows, social movements must appeal to self-interests while showing the ways in
which these interests are mutual and transcendent. With Detroit’s deep divisions and deep poverty,
tangible outcomes for getting involved are a non-negotiable feature of any effort that aims to last for
more than one cycle. Campaigns to broaden the benefit of the resources of the public sector provide
an important opportunity to produce tangible outcomes. A clear vision, strategic policy agenda, care-
ful political analysis, and excellent organizing all contribute to ensuring that incremental wins occur
while building toward a shift in power and paradigm and reinforcing participants’ desire to engage.

URBAN AGRICULTURE

Urban agriculture appears again here because part of what has driven the growth of this movement
is the immediacy and tangibility of its rewards. Community gardens yield beautifying reuse of vacant
land, community-building, safer streets (because gardeners spending time outside function as a de
facto neighborhood watch), and, of course, food.
BAN THE BOX

The purpose of the Ban the Box campaign is to assist residents returning from prison to obtain meaningful employment. After working at the Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative (MPRI), a number of Detroit organizers felt that felons who had served their time were summarily excluded from the labor market and that more needed to be done to give them a chance at meaningful employment. In 2008, the Detroit Action Commonwealth, a homeless coalition affiliated with Capuchin Soup Kitchen on Detroit’s eastside (and given staff support from the Harriet Tubman Center), grew frustrated with MPRI and began to research other options. Connecting with the Boston Worker Alliance and its criminal offense record information (CORI) reform project, the group sought to create a Ban the Box campaign in Detroit that would prohibit the City from asking on its job application forms whether an applicant had a prior criminal record. The Ban the Box campaign is now working to get the City of Detroit to adopt a vendor ordinance that would require all vendors with contracts with the City of $25,000 or more per year to agree to ban the box on their own job application forms.

A comprehensive approach

As demonstrated by the examples, Detroit’s community leaders and institutions possess all of these capacities. What is missing—and has transformative potential—is an approach that combines all of these strategies into an organization, campaign or alliance. Broad, propositional vision must be moored to tangible outcomes while tangible outcomes must build towards something broader. Both must be used as tools to organize. The expansion of organizing capacity in Detroit will require linking informal social movements that bring numbers and fresh energy and insight with formalized institutions that bring resources and infrastructure to sustain what is built. For movements truly to change institutions, though—not just form new membership bases that soon become as unengaged and detached from the institution’s agenda as the previous base—organizing must include an element of leadership development. Leadership development programs create spaces for key constituencies to bridge-build by naming the challenges, values and vision that unite them and identifying campaigns of common interest. Campaigns to increase government accountability represent this kind of cross-cutting interest because they unite any that are locked out of closed and opaque decision-making processes—a problem that crosses sectors, issue areas and identity groups. Leadership development programs are also a critical forum for developing grassroots leaders’ policy expertise. Detroit’s appreciable policy challenges call for community leaders not to stop at demanding that policymakers solve their problems but to claim that responsibility for themselves by developing their own research and policy capacity.

In sum, strong social movements organize into institutions and boundary-crossing coalitions and develop leaders that can propose a broad vision and effective public policy solutions for the immediate and long-term benefit of their communities. Foundations aiming to build powerful grassroots engagement in Detroit must understand Detroit’s unique dynamics. Many local and national foundations have made an explicit decision to play an unconventional role in the region as described by Kresge Foundation President Rip Rapson:

“...strong social movements organize into institutions and boundary-crossing coalitions and develop leaders that can propose a broad vision and effective public policy solutions for the immediate and long-term benefit of their communities.”

Philanthropy’s role in building civic engagement in Detroit

Foundations aiming to build powerful grassroots engagement in Detroit must understand Detroit’s unique dynamics. Many local and national foundations have made an explicit decision to play an unconventional role in the region as described by Kresge Foundation President Rip Rapson:
“Philanthropy working in Detroit can no longer sit at the margins, hoping that their good intentions and charitable impulses will help the community slide through tough times. Instead, foundations—both national and local—are positioning themselves at the center of a new civic agenda, aggressively helping shape a very different civic trajectory.” This choice to back specific policies and development projects and support them by sitting at decision-making tables can place funders at odds with community agendas, right or wrong. Tensions are also fueled by concerns—not unique to Detroit—that grant-making mechanisms give an advantage to those groups which make big promises, go for quick fixes, and already have large budgets. Foundations that are white-led and based outside the city of Detroit are also subject to locals’ deep-rooted concerns about outsiders. Finally, the advent of foundations is seen as part of the broader trend of increasing extra-governmental power: leadership by those who are not democratically accountable.

At the 2011 annual conference of the Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, which took place in Detroit, an open letter that was handed out from Detreiors for Dignity and Democracy (a group organized by the Boggs Center) articulated this critique:

The Detroit Works process, conceived, championed and largely funded by foundations, has been the most divisive planning process in more than four decades . . . It has substituted managed public relations and empty engagement exercises for authentic citizen participation . . . Likewise, support of emergency financial managers has robbed citizens of basic democratic rights . . . Such practices are indicative of national trends by foundations to mobilize extraordinary resources to influence public policies over the objections of citizens. This is especially true in two critical issues of urban life, land use and education. Unless TFN seriously explores the destructiveness of the current efforts in Detroit, it will squander the good will it has built up over the years.13

In short, foundations find themselves in the same fraught territory as every other stakeholder invested in moving the needle in Detroit. It’s a territory rent with old wounds but, much more importantly, with policies old and new that perpetuate racial and economic chasms unlike those in any other major metropolitan region in our country. The best—and only—way to address these concerns is to support efforts with the greatest potential to grow the community’s power at the decision-making table to dismantle these policies piece by piece. The critique that such efforts are beholden to their funders is inevitable but serves as a call and incentive for funders to invest in the most effective civic engagement work. High-impact civic engagement work—work that brings community leaders and agendas to the decision-making table alongside other stakeholders; that raises the caliber of dialogue and policy solutions through constructive disagreement and negotiations; and that wins significant change—will speak for itself. Kresge, Ford, Kellogg, Mott and Skillman Foundations are among many that have put resources into civic engagement in Detroit.

As for what constitutes the greatest potential for high-impact civic engagement work, we offer the observations above. These aim to capture what Detroiters know, have told us, and are doing about the need to build power. We hope that it offers a framework and language for constructive discussions of strategy among those who share the commitment to renew democracy and shared prosperity in Detroit.

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CONCLUSION

Detroit, like most modern industrial cities, was created by the industry in which its workers labored. The city’s institutions, especially its government and commercial services, were created to serve the needs of those workers and their families, allowing industry to function profitably and eventually resulting in the complex web of relationships that make up a modern urban region. But when the industry on which Detroit depended largely abandoned it, those institutions and relationships were thrown into crisis. Detractors have been trying to resolve that crisis since the large auto companies moved their factories elsewhere. Those companies took thousands of jobs in the city and region with them, but left behind the community of workers and their institutions: their schools, neighborhoods, homes, and families.

With the elections of President Barack Obama and Mayor Dave Bing, a sense grew in 2009 that Detroit could be turned around—a sense that has now dwindled. Organizations promoting social and economic change in Detroit face an anti-democratic wave that could drastically diminish their ability to provide the region with the leadership that it so critically needs. But this can also become a period in which residents build the base of a movement that can turn the city around. Now is the time to build leadership capacity, research and policy muscle, and the organizing power needed for Detroit to seize its next watershed moment and change its course.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their assistance with this project:

For hours of writing, graphic design, and levelheaded problem-solving, Michele Bertolone of Bold Blue LLC.

For research assistance, copy editing, and more, Elisa Koff-Ginsborg, Maria Hernandez, Tamara Polyakova and the whole staff of Working Partnerships USA.

For special project advising, Donald Cohen.

For their strategic insights, David Dobbie and Paul Massaron.


We would also like to thank the numerous interviewees and focus group participants who lent their time and took the risk of candor:

- Tonya Allen, Skillman Foundation
- Bob Allison, SEIU Healthcare Michigan
- Stephanie Arellano, SEIU
- Stephen Arellano, independent consultant
- Danielle Atkinson, Michigan Voice
- Steve Babson, People Before Banks
- Michael Belzer, Great Lakes Global Freight Gateway
- Michael Blake, White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
- Sam Butler, Community Development Advocates of Detroit
- Lila Cabbil, community activist
- Lisa Canada, International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 324
- Stephanie Chang, Michigan Campaign for Justice and Asian Pacific Islander American Vote—Michigan
- Derrick Coleman, Detroit Public Schools
- Margaret Dewar and Eric Dueweke, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning of the University of Michigan
- Cris Doby, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
- Ed Egnatios, Skillman Foundation
- Patrick Falcusan, Detroit Federation of Teachers
- Rich Feldman, United Auto Workers and Boggs Center
- Donna Givens Williams, Visions Educational Development Consortium
- Lou Glazer, Michigan Future, Inc.
- Anika Goss-Foster, Local Initiatives Support Corporation – National
- Ponsella Hardaway, Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES)
- David Hecker, American Federation of Teachers—Michigan
- Karla Henderson, City of Detroit, Bing Administration
- Gregory Hicks and LaMont Satchell, City of Detroit Charter Review Commission
- Frank Houston, A Better Michigan Future and Oakland County Democratic Party
• Luther Jackson, former reporter, Detroit Free Press and former officer, The Newspaper Guild Local 22
• Burney Johnson, Michigan State Housing Development Authority
• Don Jones, New Economy Initiative
• Vince Keenan, Publius.org
• Dan Kincaid, Hamilton Anderson Detroit Works
• Jason Kosnoski, University of Michigan—Flint
• Dave Lagstein, former Director, Michigan ACORN
• Alan Levy, Community Development Advocates of Detroit and Goaltrak
• Katy Locker, Hudson Webber Foundation
• Greg Markus, University of Michigan and Detroit Action Commonwealth
• Jamila Martin, Harriet Tubman Center/Our Kids Come First
• Brian Masse, Canadian Member of Parliament, West Windsor (NDP)
• Marick Masters, Labor @ Wayne Program of Wayne State University
• Jennifer Mefford, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 58 and National Electrical Contractors Association
• Kurt Metzger, Data Driven Detroit
• John Mogk, Wayne State University Law School
• Richard Murphy, Michigan Suburbs Alliance
• Bill O’Brien, John Van Camp, and Nyse Jenkins, Harriet Tubman Center
• Sonia Plata, Latino Family Services and New Detroit
• Joe Rashid, Harriet Tubman Center
• Chris Riley, former political director, Oakland County Democratic Party
• Rich Robinson, Michigan Campaign Finance Network
• Mike Russell, City of Detroit Research and Analysis
• Simone Sagovac, Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision
• Rebecca Salminen Witt, Greening of Detroit
• Jocelyn Sargent, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
• Pam Scales, New Economy Initiative
• Sarida Scott, Community Legal Resources
• Sam Singh, New Economy Initiative
• Rev. William Smart, Jr., Los Angeles Alliance for the New Economy
• Olga Stella, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation
• Terry Stepanski, Michigan Department of Transportation
• Molly Sweeney, Ban the Box
• Tim Thorland, Community Development Advocates of Detroit and Southwest Housing Solutions
• Rashida Tlaib, Michigan State Representative, 12th District
• Karen Tyler Ruiz, United Way of Southeastern Michigan and Doing Development Differently in Detroit
• Kathryn Lynch Underwood, Detroit City Planning Commission
• Nate Walker, Boggs Educational Center
• Jen Weaver, American Association of University Professors – American Federation of Teachers
• Marty Welsh, New Economy Initiative
• Kathy Wendler, Southwest Detroit Business Association and Southwest Detroit Community Benefits Coalition
• David Whitaker, City of Detroit Research and Analysis
• Marja Winters, City of Detroit Planning Department
• Gary Wozniak, SHAR Recovery Park
• Guy Williams, Detroiter Working for Environmental Justice
• Saundra Williams and Chris Michalakis, Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO
• Sandra Yu, Detroiter Working for Environmental Justice
• Eric Zachary, Annenberg Institute for School Reform
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The 1000 Leaders Project believes that communities can grow their own leaders – the smart, bold, effective leaders that we need to make our democracy work for everyone. As a nonprofit technical assistance provider, it creates unique, transformative training programs and helps organizations across the country to customize these powerful tools for their own communities. Because leadership development sits at the nexus of multiple strategies to build community power to make change, the 1000 Leaders Project also provides technical assistance on research, policy development, organizing and civic engagement, and organizational development. Co-author Elly Matsumura serves as its associate director. The 1000 Leaders Project can be contacted via its Web site, 1000leadersproject.org.

Working Partnerships USA (WPUSA) was founded in 1995 in Silicon Valley by labor, faith, nonprofit, neighborhood and community groups to equip everyday people to participate and win in developing a more fair and free society. In areas like health, jobs, housing and transportation, WPUSA conducts research, develops policy, organizes coalitions and facilitates advocacy that engages working families and communities of color. It works to get successful policies implemented and replicated across the country. Working Partnerships is headquartered in San Jose, the tenth largest city in the nation. With vast diversity and no single ethnic group in the majority, it’s an ideal testing ground for policy development, coalition building and civic engagement. Co-author Cindy Chavez serves as executive director of both Working Partnerships USA and the 1000 Leaders Project. Working Partnerships USA can be contacted via its Web site, wpusa.org.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was produced as part of From Crisis to Opportunity: An Investigation of Detroit’s Public Leadership, Policy, Systems and Engagement, a national research collaboration conducted in 2010 to 2011 to examine Detroit’s policy and community dynamics during that unique moment. Recognizing Detroit’s historical leadership of national political and economic trends like urbanization and industrialization, the project studied the challenges and opportunities for civic engagement in the region, seeking lessons for not only the region but the whole country. Research concluded in the first part of 2011 and was followed by feedback, analysis, writing and the publication of reports on land use, education, and strategies for strengthening social movements. The national 1000 Leaders Project co-led the collaboration with the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, bringing in a team of Detroit experts to conduct the research and contribute sections of this report. Working Partnerships USA led the analysis of research findings for the project and also conducted research and report co-writing. The project was made possible by the generosity of the Ford Foundation.