

DETROIT'S EMERGENCY AND ITS INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS



Last week, Rick Snyder announced he'd disenfranchise the 700,000 mostly African American residents of Detroit in a bid to solve the city's seemingly intractable financial problems.

The Emergency Manager he'll appoint is expected to come in and cut the wages of the city's middle class workers and sell off Detroit's assets like Belle Isle. Along with Belle Isle, observers expect Detroit's excellent art museum, Detroit Institute of the Arts, home of some of the best Diego Rivera murals in the world, his tribute to Industry, to be sold.

Oddly, it's the museum that offers a better solution for Detroit's problems, and not just because the mural depicts people of all skin colors working side-by-side.

Last fall, the counties surrounding Detroit decided that the museum – one of the few shining glories in Detroit – served to the entire Southeast MI region, and voted to pass a millage to fund it. The vote was significant because the museum (heck, the communist murals themselves) has suffered from the same fate as the city itself: glory days when the city was booming, hard times when white flight began the process that has brought us where we are today, and then abandonment by the state.

Though the DIA began as an independent nonprofit in 1885, it quickly turned to the City of Detroit for financial help, and in 1919, it became a city department. The pattern was set: In good economic times, things were swell, but downturns were devastating. When the city nearly went belly-up in the 1970s, the state took over funding the museum – but only after it closed doors for three weeks in 1975.

The status quo held until John Engler swept into the governor's office. Philosophically opposed to arts funding, he cut state arts spending by 46% in 1991.

The millage campaign to support museum elicited some of the same emotions that Detroit's failure now has – though in much more muted form. DIA was managed by corrupt people; why should anyone get a bailout. But ultimately, just enough voters recognized that DIA is part of SE MI's community, that voters came up with the money.

Opponents also cite a range of other concerns, from a reluctance among some suburbanites to subsidize a museum in Detroit and consider the tax "a bailout," to the feeling that those who use the museum should be the ones who pay for it.

Those who favor the millage counter that the museum has already been raising an average of \$16 million per year. As metro Detroit's greatest cultural treasure with a regional audience, the responsibility to fund it should cut across county lines, advocates say.

"There's no major city in the world without a major museum," said Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, a prominent Republican who supports the millage.

"Taxes go to projects that are worthy, whether we use them or not," Patterson said, noting that when he travels around the world to recruit business, he is always asked about schools, neighborhoods and cultural amenities. "The DIA is a huge opportunity for me to answer that question in a positive way. It's an economic development tool for me."

Last fall, the voters of SE MI chose to regionalize one of the cultural jewels of Detroit. Note, to some degree the state has stepped in to support the Red Wings and the Convention Center, Cobo Hall. Michigan has actually been in the process of picking and choosing which parts of Detroit it deems worth saving, all without acknowledging that's what it is doing. It has not, in that process, ever picked Detroit's residents.

With that in mind, consider how Scott Martelle, author of *Detroit: A Biography*, describes Detroit's problems.

The problem in Detroit is not the people in charge (though some Detroit leaders have certainly failed the city). The real problem is the broader structure of government in the region. And therein lies a lesson for other urban areas and, perhaps, a template for avoiding what befell the Motor City.

Detroit, once the nation's fourth largest city, has been crumbling since the 1950s, when its population peaked at a little over 1.84 million people. Estimates put the current population at under 700,000, and Detroit leads the nation's large cities in the percentage of people living below the federal poverty line. More than a quarter of Detroit's 140-square-mile city is now empty space. A Detroit house is cheaper to buy than a new car, and a high-paying

job within the city limits is a rare thing to find, even with a recent influx of downtown-focused developments.

The emptying of Detroit stems from a complex mix of intractable racism, corporate and governmental decisions, failed institutions and crime levels that have driven most of the middle class to the suburbs. Local governments have regularly undercut each other with tax deals to lure jobs (much as Texas Gov. Rick Perry tried to do on his recent visit to California). These deals have helped corporations at the expense of communities like Detroit, causing the city's tax base to shrink faster than the city government could adapt and leaving it with massive debt, annual operating deficits, a demoralized workforce, an impoverished population base – and no plan for how to fix things.

This all happened in a state that relies more on local property taxes for services than many other states, meaning that affluent (usually white) municipalities can enjoy the benefits of their wealth, while nearby poorer cities suck ever more out of the residents that remain. This left Detroit, in 2011, as number 1 among top 50 cities in terms of tax rates, and dead last among those top 50 cities in terms of property values.

Martelle argues that the best solution for Detroit is to adopt regional solutions to the problem.

To come back, Detroit needs to start finding ways to change those factors. A racial divide, which pits white-majority suburbs against a black-majority city, is the toughest problem, but even it is solvable. The most important step would be to regionalize crucial services, including schools, police and fire

protection. As much as suburbanites might dislike the notion, the metro region's economic health depends on a vibrant and diverse economy and a stable core city. And as much as Detroiters may balk, they, in turn, need the support of the suburbs if they are to climb out of this hole.

I agree.

Democrats and Republicans dreamed up this stupid Emergency Manager idea 30 years ago because it was easier to do that than take on the deep segregation in most of MI. I suspect Democrats chose to embrace Emergency Managers rather than offend the "Reagan Democrats" in Macomb and Wayne Counties. (Wayne is the county that includes Detroit, but also includes a lot of working class suburbs, many of them white; there has been talk of administering services in Detroit at the county level, though this would still leave out the far more affluent Oakland county of the mix.) Since then, globalization has wreaked havoc on all of MI, but the problem has been especially concentrated in the heavily black cities. And those same cities – Detroit especially – were particularly hard hit when predatory lending greatly accelerated the slow decline of many neighborhoods.

These are tough problems. But the way to solve them is not to segment off the cities and turn them into profit centers for warehousing children until they turn 16, and then further profit centers to imprison them afterwards (Snyder did, thankfully, choose not to increase privatization of MI prisons last week). The way to solve them is not to loot the cities' few remaining assets, leaving even fewer resources with which to turn around.

Last fall, voters in Southeast MI willingly chose to regionalize DIA. It's time we started talking about regionalizing, at least, the future of its children.

*(Detail of Diego Rivera Industry mural by
Inhabitat.)*