

Detroit replaces New Orleans as most beleaguered American city

Contributed by DAVID CRARY and COREY WILLIAMS

DETROIT (AP) — One measure of how tough times are in the Motor City: Some of the offenders in jail don't want to be released; some who do get out promptly re-offend to head back where there's heat, health care and three meals a day.

“For the first time, I'm seeing guys make a conscious decision they'll be better off in prison than in the community, homeless and hungry,” said Joseph Williams of New Creations Community Outreach, which assists ex-offenders. “In prison they've got three hots and a cot, so they commit a crime to go back in and come out when times are better.”

For now, better times seem distant. Even with no hurricane or other natural disaster to blame, Detroit has — by many measures — replaced New Orleans as America's most beleaguered city.

The jobless rate has climbed past 21 percent, the embattled school district just fired its superintendent, tens of thousands of homes and stores are derelict and abandoned, the ex-mayor is in jail for a text-messaging sex scandal. Even the pro football team is a pathetic joke, within two losses of an unprecedented 0-16 season.

And overarching these and many other woes is the near-collapse of the U.S. auto industry, Detroit's vital source of jobs and status for more than a century.

“We're the Motor City,” said Scott Alan Davis, who oversees community development projects in one of the worst-hit neighborhoods. “When the basis for that name collapses, that's started to scare people.”

Among the worried is 81-year-old Warlena McDuell, a retired surgical technician who shares a home with her cancer-stricken daughter. On a recent weekday, she was among hundreds of Detroiters, most of them elderly, filling orange-plastic grocery carts at a food bank run by Focus:HOPE, a local nonprofit.

“It's a depression — not a recession,” McDuell said, with the authority of someone who has lived through both. “It will get worse before it gets better.”

Behind her in line, stocking up on canned apple juice and fruit cocktail, was Benjamin Smith, 77, who once held jobs with Uniroyal and Chrysler. Maneuvering his cart slowly, one hand gripping a cane, he was unable to muster much cheer when someone extended holiday good wishes.

“How are we going to do well?” he replied. “Everything's busted up.”

Focus:HOPE's food program serves 41,000 people a month; manager Frank Kubik estimates that's only half the number of Detroiters in need of the assistance.

“It's not going to be a nice Christmas for a lot of folks,” he said.

DeWayne Wells, president of Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan, said demand is up by 25 percent from a year ago in the region's food banks as auto-industry layoffs multiply.

“Many people are first-timers – they have no idea how to navigate the system, how to qualify for food stamps,” Wells said. “Last year, some were donors – now they're clients.”

WHITE FLIGHT

The roots of Detroit's current plight go back decades. Court-ordered school busing and the 12th Street riots of 1967 accelerated an exodus of whites to the suburbs, and many middle-class blacks followed, shrinking the city's population from a peak of 1.8 million in the 1950s to half that now.

About 83 percent of the current population is African-American; of cities with more than 100,000 people, only Gary, Ind., had a higher percentage in the latest census.

Detroit's crime, poverty, unemployment and school dropout rates are among the worst of any major U.S. city. The bus system is widely panned; car and home insurance rates are high. Chain grocery stores are absent, forcing many Detroiters to rely on high-priced corner stores.

“There's always been a real can-do spirit among our people,” said the Rev. Edgar Vann, pastor of Second Ebenezer Church. “That's being beaten down right now. ... These times, unlike others, have sapped a lot of that spirit from them.”

Vann, in addition to overseeing a 5,000-member megachurch, founded the Vanguard Community Development Corp., which under Scott Alan Davis's leadership is building scores of new homes and offering education programs in the blighted North End.

One apartment complex, for the elderly, is rising barely a block from two grade schools recently abandoned by the city, and now sitting empty and ransacked.

“It's death to the neighborhood,” said Vann, some anger in his voice, as he gestured to homes that had been abandoned and vandalized since the schools closed.

He worries that despair and frustration may take a toll as Detroiters see more manufacturing jobs vanish and get no short-term answer when they ask, “What next?”

“Somebody needs to hear us before we begin to see a rise of social upheaval,” Vann said. “I hate to say that. It's a God-forbid reality.”

TALE OF TWO CITIES

For Mark Covington, as for many of his neighbors, there are two Detroits. One features swanky casinos, opulent hotels and two new sports stadiums, beckoning high rollers and deep-pocketed out-of-towners to a relatively vibrant downtown. Luxury condo developments are opening; an ambitious RiverWalk project is mostly completed.

Then there's the vast Detroit of decaying neighborhoods, with weedy, trash-strewn lots and vacant, burned-out houses. Some areas, even close to downtown, have a rural look because so many lots are now empty.

"It makes me want to leave," said Covington, 36. "But I figure, if I leave, who else is going to help? Who else is going to do it? People like me are what's going to turn Detroit around."

With no job and plenty of time on his hands, Covington has spent the past year working on what he calls the Georgia Street Garden — three empty lots he and his friends have converted into an inner city farm east of downtown.

It's one of hundreds of urban vegetable gardens citywide that have taken root on land cleared after the razing of abandoned homes.

Covington and his friends did what the city hadn't done: moved trash from the lots to the curbs. They planted tomatoes, collard greens, kale, cabbage, herbs, broccoli and other vegetables, as well as a few fruit trees.

"During the time I was out here cleaning up, I thought it would be a good idea for a garden," he said.

"Everybody uses this path to go up to the closest grocery store and the closest corner store. I figured if they gotta walk past here. ... maybe they'll pick some food instead of having to go up to the grocery store all of the time."

A makeshift, wooden movie screen was erected last summer for outdoor film nights.

"I'm seeing camaraderie around here I haven't seen since I was a little kid," Covington said. "It's actually starting to feel like a village again."

He just wishes they had more help from city leaders.

"I'm proud our downtown is coming back," Covington said. "They've put money into the downtown. We need a downtown. Everybody understands that. But what about the people that pay for it? I mean, we pay our taxes. We need city services. It's the crime and cleaning up."

“I just don't understand how they, anybody in the city ... the mayor's administration, can ride through the neighborhoods and see the way it is and not want to do anything about it.”

CONVICTED MAYOR

For all its woes, Detroit has no shortage of residents offering to tackle them. There are 15 candidates for the Feb. 24 special mayoral election necessitated by the conviction of Kwame Kilpatrick for trying to cover up an affair with a former top aide.

The winner of the special election only serves out Kilpatrick's unfinished term, and a regular mayoral election will be held in November, burdening the city with a year of political uncertainty and division as it grapples with staggering problems.

“There are some good candidates – I've never seen a field as broad and deep,” said Steve Tobocman, who represents a Detroit district in the state legislature. “That being said, I don't think there’s a concrete vision on how to deal with the real challenges.”

Solely in terms of municipal government, the challenges are daunting. The City Council’s fiscal analyst recently projected that Detroit's budget deficit could rise to more than \$200 million by June. The Detroit Public School District faces a deficit of more than \$400 million, prompting the state to declare a financial emergency. The district’s superintendent, Connie Calloway, was fired on Dec. 15.

Several dozen schools have been closed in the past three years, and civic leaders worry the system will be incapable of helping young Detroiters prepare for whatever new types of jobs might emerge down the road.

“Most of the middle-class parents have disengaged, taken their kids out,” said Vann. “We don't have the parent advocacy that’s necessary to drive reform.”

HIGHEST CRIME RATE

The FBI’s latest statistics, for 2007, show Detroit with the highest violent crime rate of any major city. Yet Jeriel Heard, chief of jails and court for Detroit's Wayne County, said jail conditions may deteriorate because of budget-related pressure to eliminate a quarter of the roughly 800 jail deputy positions.

Heard confirmed that some offenders, notably those without homes of their own, were now expressing reluctance to leave jail when their sentences were done.

He also reported that property crime in some Detroit neighborhoods had stabilized or declined because targets of opportunity were fewer now that most remaining residents are poor and many of the homes have been abandoned and cannibalized.

Trying to combat the blight, the city has applied for \$47 million in federal neighborhood stabilization money, with half

earmarked to tear down more than 2,300 vacant homes. About \$8 million would be spent to rehabilitate vacant houses and \$4 million to construct new houses.

But this effort would make only a small dent. About 44,000 of the 67,000 homes that have gone into foreclosure since 2005 remain empty, and it costs about \$10,000 to demolish each vacant house, according to Planning and Development Department director Doug Diggs.

Overall, the residential real estate market is catastrophic, with the Detroit Board of Realtors now pegging the average price of a home in the city at \$18,513. Some owners can't find buyers at any price.

"If you no longer can sell your property, how can you move elsewhere?" said Robin Boyle a professor of urban planning at Wayne State University. "Some people just switch out the lights and leave — property values have gone so low, walking away is no longer such a difficult option."

SHIFTING ECONOMY

Looking ahead, Detroit civic leaders express long-term optimism but acknowledge the shift away from a heavy-manufacturing economy will be painful.

"Up until the '70s, you could come to the city without education, without speaking English, and get a job in the auto industry and instantly be in the middle class, economically speaking," said Mike Stewart, director of Wayne State's Walter P. Reuther Library and an expert on the auto industry.

"A lot of folks in the city depended on these jobs for generations — they don't exist anymore," he said. "A lot of Detroiters are unprepared, educationally and technologically, to cope."

Another fundamental problem is the gap between the city's circumstances and those in the surrounding region, which includes many relatively affluent, predominantly white suburbs.

"The lack of support, the disparities with the rest of the region are greater than folks realize," said Tobocman, a Democrat who served as House majority floor leader. "I'm not sure the system can sustain itself."

But he said the conversation on one option — greater regional sharing of local tax revenue — "is not a real active one."

Mark Douglas, 41, is among the metro area's most successful African-American car dealers — he succeeded his father in 2005 as president of Avis Ford in Southfield, one of the suburbs bordering Detroit to the north.

"Detroit has got to figure out a way to make people feel it's safe — if people don't want to live there, it's

tough to develop any kind of tax base," Douglas said. "Whites have to move back in. You've got to have the integration factor. Everyone has to come together."

Though Avis Ford is faring better than some local competitors, the recession has taken a toll. It sold only 112 new vehicles in October, down from about 200 in October 2007.

Douglas said the dealership is recouping some of the loss in new car sales by performing service work on older cars no longer covered by warranties.

His father, Walter, 76, remains chairman of Avis Ford and serves as a trustee of many organizations, including the Detroit Symphony.

"This has been the most difficult and challenging time in my recollection," he said.

For some community leaders, the drumbeat of bad news seems like overkill.

"All of Detroit is not going to hell — we've been hit unfairly," said the Rev. Wendell Anthony, president of Detroit branch of the NAACP. "Our best days are in front of us."

Short-term, he said two crucially needed steps would be a moratorium on further home foreclosures and pressure on banks to make loans more available.

Another civic leader, William F. Jones Jr., expressed concern that the inevitable auto industry retrenchment might force cutbacks in corporate support of local nonprofits.

"Detroit is a very giving community, but it's hard to reach out beyond your capacity," said Jones, who recently retired as chief operating officer of Chrysler Financial and will become head of Focus:HOPE on Jan. 1

"I hope the region is prepared to band together, because we're all in this together," he said. "We won't get through the tough times if we don't have a dream of what's ahead."

Detroit's downtown abounds with symbols of past dreams — the still-gleaming round towers of the Renaissance Center of the '70s, Super Bowl XL venue Ford Field, the three hotel-casino resorts with their gaudy exterior lights and cavernous gaming rooms.

Yet less than two miles from downtown stands the decaying, 18-story Michigan Central railroad station, built in 1913 and unoccupied for 20 years while developers shied way from the cost of restoring its

Beaux-Arts grandeur. Along Grand River Avenue, a six-lane thoroughfare leading from downtown to the northwest, liquor stores and check-cashing outlets alternate with scores of abandoned commercial buildings, some boarded up, others just gutted shells.

To the west, in the modest residential neighborhood of Brightmoor, there were five burnt-out houses on a single short block. The facade of one was daubed in red and blue graffiti – some obscene, some gang-related; the charred rubble inside included a battered toy truck.

The scene brought to mind the city's motto, crafted by a Roman Catholic priest after a devastating fire in 1805: “We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes.”

AP Photo/Carlos Osorio: An abandoned home is seen in the the modest residential neighborhood of Brightmoor in Detroit, Thursday, Dec. 11. There were five burnt-out houses on a single short block. The scene brings to mind the city's motto, crafted by a Roman Catholic priest after a devastating fire in 1805: "We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes."