

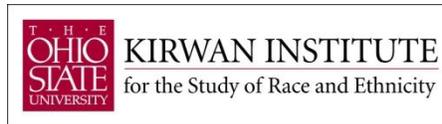
**Recommendations for Assuring Robust Civic Engagement & Equity  
in Detroit's Shrinking City Planning Effort**

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Detroit is in the process of considering how to remake itself. After decades of population loss and a declining tax base, there is a serious discussion about if and how to deliberately and strategically shrink the city. This effort is critical to assuring Detroit is a vibrant and healthy community and to assuring a sustainable and equitable future for the city. The spatial dimensions of the city's declining areas and infrastructure is both costly and inefficient and likely not sustainable. However, this effort will also have disparate impacts on various communities and populations in Detroit, with some communities being poised to flourish and others facing an uncertain future. To assure this process occurs in a way which is equitable and sustainable, the community (especially those who are likely to be most directly impacted) must help drive the planning process and have ownership in its outcomes. The ongoing efforts to reposition Detroit for the future require a planning process which must be grounded in robust civic engagement, with transparency and public access to information if it is going to be successful and sustainable. In addition, the planning process must consider Detroit's relationship to the region: should this process be a re-imagining of the region in addition to the future of Detroit? Does it make sense to proceed without considering the larger metropolitan area and what the potential consequence of not including Metro-Detroit? What are some of the drawbacks to enlarging the process?

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Engagement with the public is more than just passive information collecting, but should also seek to empower communities both in guiding the short term planning outcomes but also in building greater civic capacity for long term community health. This expanded and more substantial definition of engagement captures what is often referred to as robust civic engagement. Robust civic engagement goes beyond just traditional engagement activities with the public with a goal of utilizing every engagement opportunity to build long term capacity, organizational leadership and skills in impacted communities that are well- informed and help shape the process. Planning processes should not just be shaped by policy makers and planning professionals alone. Technical concepts should be “de-mystified” for local communities and planning activities should engage full decision making by local citizens and communities.<sup>1</sup> Robust civic engagement is not traditional public involvement but a longer term effort focused on relationship and community building.

The overarching goal of robust civic engagement should be to build a civic community, one in which civic infrastructure is supported and community capacity is enhanced. This approach requires that impacted communities participate in the design, goal and process of planning, including helping to identify metrics, timetables, and actors. Engagement is an opportunity through our policy and planning efforts to engage the community in ways which not only produce a better planning process and outcomes, but also produce a critical investment in civic capacity for communities. This is critically important for marginalized communities which are likely to be the most impacted with the least amount of effective input and knowledge. These communities often have very little input into the design of civic engagement activities and if they are consulted, it usually occurs after many important design decisions have been made. The design of the process is not insignificant. This does not mean that any one community can totally define or control the process, nor should the process be controlled and designed solely by policymakers.

There are tremendous benefits to be derived from utilizing effective robust civic engagement to guide planning processes, especially planning processes targeting issues of equity. Traditional public engagement approaches, such as public hearings and passive information sharing, can exacerbate existing structural power imbalances and escalate conflict. This often leads to undemocratic decisions that are ripe with conflict and inequitable. Successful engagement activities can help avoid unproductive conflict, while building public will to support sustainable planning solutions and producing democratic decisions that are more equitable. Robust and targeted civic engagement is critical for addressing concerns and needs of disadvantaged communities, giving voice to traditionally voiceless constituencies while producing more informed and innovative ideas or solutions. Successful robust civic engagement also can produce long term benefits, helping produce a civic infrastructure in communities that need to build community capacity to address long term goals of community development, sustainability, and equity.

Although the series of public forums undertaken and planned in Detroit as part of the planning process are a good first step, these activities are not a robust engagement process and this already has led to some concerns and voices of dissent in the community. Some have questioned the transparency of the

process, and fears that a plan already exists have spread.<sup>ii</sup> Meetings are leaving some participants with more uncertainty and concerns rather than resolving anxieties about the process and outcomes.<sup>iii</sup> Additionally, the engagement process (and the use of electronic clickers for collecting input) seems more like passive information collection than productive community- driven dialogue. As one participant noted in the media: *“(There’s no) dialogue. Dialogue’s when you say something, then I say something and we exchange ideas.”*<sup>iv</sup> By embracing a more community- driven planning process with significant community dialogue, transparency and engagement, this process can benefit the community, identify more innovative community- driven solutions, and increase the likelihood of successful implementation.

### **General Strategies & Recommendations:**

The following strategies and recommendations would strengthen the planning process for shrinking Detroit and produce a more robust civic engagement, which is critical to the long term success of this planning process and to the City of Detroit’s future.

#### *Build Trust by Sharing Responsibility-*

Trust and respect are essential to effective civic engagement with traditionally marginalized or excluded communities. Willingness to share power, responsibility, and leadership authority builds trust between the community and official decision makers. Committing resources, a demonstrated commitment to the process, consistency, and cultural competency encourage engagement and also builds good will and trust between communities and planning consortiums.<sup>v</sup> It is critical for disadvantaged communities to act in more than just an advisory role, but to have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision making processes. Public sector entities must also be transparent in sharing information, including details on process, goals, and decision making approaches to planning initiatives. Tension may arise because of different interests, values, and positions. Conflict must be dealt with in an open and constructive way that promotes collaborative engagement and avoids adversarial engagement. Additionally, disagreements and conflicts should be discussed openly but with sensitivity to disadvantaged communities. Trust- building also takes time, but the longer that engagement activities and relationship- building occurs, the greater the likelihood of trust being developed between consortium representatives and disadvantaged communities.

#### *Set Civic Engagement Goals and Equity Metrics for the Planning Process-*

Work with stakeholders and the community to help define starting key concepts. Define robust civic engagement for the process and equity metrics. Developing common definitions with stakeholders from the community will help avoid oversight which might lead to conflict in the planning process. Social equity metrics must also be integrated into the goals of planning activities; equity issues are more likely to be addressed if openly identified early in the planning process.<sup>vi</sup> Ideally, outcome- based goals (e.g. identification of new policies or investments) as well as process- based goals (e.g. identifying types of engagement to occur with each community) should be utilized to ensure equity concerns are integrated into the planning effort. Additionally, administrative processes should be defined clearly to clarify how

the public and marginalized communities will contribute as decision makers in the planning process, and to enable clear communication of the process to community members.

#### Target Multifaceted Engagement Efforts with Marginalized Communities-

The engagement process should include targeted and multi-faceted engagement activities with marginalized populations. This approach utilizes a variety of techniques to engage these communities, including non-traditional approaches to public engagement, such as utilizing technology, interaction with youth in the communities, and coordination with key stakeholders who serve these communities. In addition, engagement must try to encourage “innovative and collaborative” leadership development and be built upon a process of “purposeful” public deliberation, a process that weighs multiple options and has mechanisms for managing conflict with the goal of creating innovative and creative solutions.<sup>vii</sup> One of the most important benefits produced by civic engagement is the ability to build community capacity and civic infrastructure in traditionally neglected marginalized communities. Communities are able to utilize civic engagement to be better organized, identify new solutions, advocate for policy changes, and other benefits. Community development is intricately connected to community action and engagement. Community- based decision making and leadership development is enabled by providing technical and research- based information, and facilitating interactions which allow the community to engage, deliberate, and respond.<sup>viii</sup>

#### **Specific Action Items:**

The following specific action items should be considered immediately to bolster the current engagement activities.

- Make it clear to the public that they have power and influence over the outcomes of this process, and that they are partners in driving the plan; this is essential to building a constituency to have ownership in and fight for the planning outcomes identified through this process.
- Utilize this process as an opportunity to launch a deep public education campaign to work with and educate Detroit’s residents on issues of land use and development, in order to promote good planning processes (and build public support for these processes) in the community.
- It is critical to provide resources to the community with technical assistance and consultants to help it understand the process and serve its needs. Some of the needs are likely to shift as information and various options are explored.
- Empower the external civic engagement consultant to be more central to the process; this role is essential because the external consultant is publically viewed as less influenced by political concerns.
- Integrate smaller group- based dialogue sessions and work groups, in addition to the larger forum convenings (large forum meetings can be intimidating and disempowering too many participants). These small group sessions can deepen their understanding about the questions being posed to the public and create opportunities to speak and learn from others about how

they feel concerning these issues. Create a space where attendees can understand each other's reality and examine their own beliefs in the context of group dialogue.

- Rethink the polling questions being posed to the public. For example, allowing participants to only pick one quality of life measure establishes a “loss” frame with the public. This “loss” frame will provoke fear that essential services and quality of life assets will be lost as part of this process. Work with a communications consultant, skilled in framing productive public dialogue, to produce more sensitive and instructive survey and engagement inquiries.
- Include a regional presence on the task force (including Macomb and Oakland County), and fully engage faith leaders from all communities.
- The community should be supported to sponsor charettes as part of the process, with the community driving the focus for charettes. The community will also need support to understand some of the concepts and terminology related to planning and financing, which will be essential to the process. The community will need to have a consultant that can help them understand planning processes, techniques, and concepts, and assist them in building models for different possibilities for the city's future.

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<sup>i</sup>Jones, Bernice. (1990). Democratic Neighborhood Planning. Chapter 2 in *Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners*. American Planning Association. Chicago, IL

<sup>ii</sup> <http://detnews.com/article/20110121/METRO01/101210374>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://detnews.com/article/20110128/METRO01/101280364/Detroiters-discuss-Bing-s-consolidation-plan#ixzz1CKzcmU8U>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://detroitworkproject.com/2011/01/28/first-public-meeting-held-on-shrinking-detroit/>

<sup>v</sup> Villalobos, Monica. (2007). Smart Growth & Social Equity: Lessons in Civic Engagement. City of South Gate, CA. Transportation and Land Use Collaborative of Southern California. Presentation February 9, 2007.

<sup>vi</sup> Policy Link. (2010). Building Communities of Opportunity Through the Sustainable Communities Initiative. Comments prepared as part of the PolicyLink and HUD joint webinar. “Shaping The New HUD Sustainable Communities Program: What Advocates Need to Know.” March 4, 2010.

<sup>vii</sup> USDA & SRDC. (2010). Community Resource and Economic Development. Report prepared with support from the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Southern Rural Development Center.

<sup>viii</sup> USDA & SRDC. (2010). Community Resource and Economic Development. Report prepared with support from the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Southern Rural Development Center.