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Getting to a smaller Detroit

BY ROBIN BOYLE

Mayor Dave Bing’s recent announcements that he will address the downsizing of Detroit are a huge step forward for the city and indeed for the region. And, in this weak economy, it is good to learn that he has the backing of regional leaders such as Rip Rapson of the Kresge Foundation. And about time, too.

It is now 12 years since the British geographer Sir Peter Hall wrote in his magnum opus, “Cities in Civilization,” that Detroit “has become an astonishing case of industrial dereliction; perhaps, before long, the first major industrial city in history to revert to farmland.” And it is 17 years devastating years since the late Marie Farrell Donaldson, then the city **ombudsman**, wrote that parts of the city needed to be “mothballed” to avert urban decline. Both were ignored.

As city and regional leaders enter into this most critical and complicated policy arena, they need help, guidance and – most important of all – fortitude.

For their work will take them into uncharted territory. There is no rubric for this; there is no template. There are, truthfully, no easy fixes. But let me offer Mayor Bing a set of markers that might help guide his Herculean journey.

First, now that the Detroit Data Collaborative has released the results of its **first vacancy survey**, we know more about the scale of the challenge facing the city. Accurate data is critical. On NBC’s “Nightly News” on Feb. 3, a New York community activist told the nation that 50 square miles of Detroit lay vacant and abandoned. Was she correct? According to the

recent survey she was wide of the mark by 15 square miles! Numbers, accurate numbers, matter.

Now the Data Collaborative needs the resources to count and map commercial vacancy and, critically, get accurate data on the size and condition of parks and other city-owned land. Moreover, it can play a vital role in the downsizing process by getting data out into the public domain. And as happens in other cities, engaging the public in updating information and contributing their ideas, their vision, will help move Detroit forward.

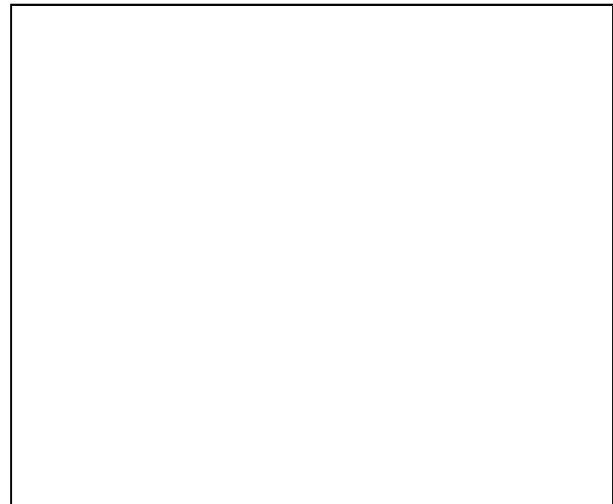
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Second, and even harder, is the need to craft a new language that doesn’t resort to “re-”: the Latin prefix meaning again or back.

The urban planning lexicon is littered with revival, renewal and regeneration. The vision that is so badly missing in Detroit needs to be just that — visionary, and absent the tired, failed rhetoric of recovering the past.

So what’s the city going to look like? We don’t know, yet, but it is clear that the 20th Century city that separated uses between relatively low

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density, single-family housing and sprawling industrial plants is history. Instead, the city is more likely to become a complex mosaic of activities, places and spaces.

We may indeed see a Gratiot forest, a new Hubbard farm or Chene village, and more. But what matters as much as individual ideas, perhaps more, is a vision for the city as a whole. Sustainable, in the full sense of the word.

Processing vision into change also matters. Peter Drucker once wrote: “Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work.” For example, there has been a horrible history of moving families across our cities, often against their will. This was termed “urban renewal” – clearing tracts of housing for new uses, for new owners. But moving today’s isolated households into new homes will be essential to make strong, viable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

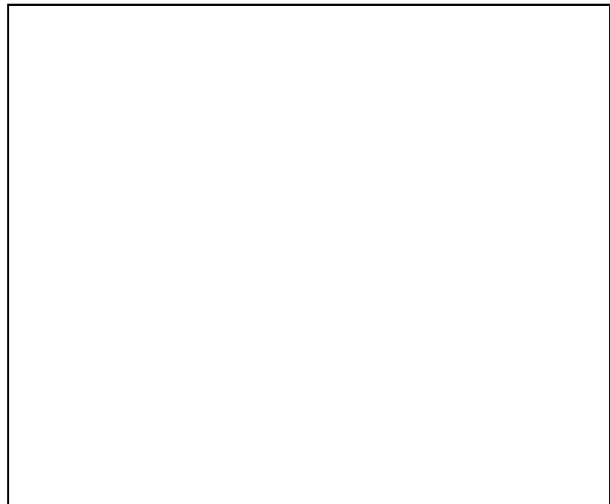
The mayor and the Council will need the strength, the resources and the way to do this. And, as both Hall and Donaldson predicted, Bing will need to triage the 138.7 square miles that is Detroit and find ways to set aside unused land that, to be truthful, is a deadweight on all households, all businesses, all institutions.

Last, transparency. This has recently got a bad rap as President Barack Obama’s administration has failed to keep its promises regarding open government. But as Mayor Bing and his team grapple with the implications of downsizing, they need to shed light on all their deliberations. Unlike the failed processes of the past, where there was a bias toward listening only to outside consultants and other experts, there is an urgent need to have public discourse and open deliberation.

Downsizing Detroit will be hard, really hard, but the issues affect everyone. Voice and opinion matter; let it include Detroiters throughout the coming years.

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