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Questions dog Detroit Works plan: Advocates want to see long-term strategy

By [Nancy Kaffer](#)

The Detroit Works Project, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing's signature policy initiative, has been touted as a plan to make the city more functional by consolidating residents in seven to nine of Detroit's most viable neighborhoods.

What the mayor described last week was something different.

As Bing unveiled the first phase of the project, he offered not a long-term plan but a short-term solution that aims to make life better for Detroiters by changing the way city services are delivered according to neighborhood conditions -- while concentrating outside dollars in three demonstration areas.

And community development advocates are still waiting for more details about how Bing will roll out the plan.

In the months ahead, Bing must juggle several tasks: implement the short-term plan while continuing to develop a long-term plan, appropriately handle foundation dollars and federal funds targeted in demonstration areas, forge relationships with community development advocates already working in the city and continue developing a long-term plan that incorporates short-term outcomes.

Bing must also convince gun-shy residents that this process is different from past efforts by previous mayors to align city services and neighborhoods.

There's a unique opportunity at stake. Last month, the administration of President Barack Obama started a program that will change the way federal funds are distributed, allowing cities greater discretion in how those dollars are spent. U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan visited Detroit to announce the change, affirming the Obama administration's faith in Detroit and Bing as mayor.

Bing's short-term intervention is the result of a citywide Detroit Works analysis that assigned neighborhoods to one of three classifications: steady, distressed or transitional.

The city plans to tailor services based on neighborhoods' needs, beefing up blight enforcement in a steady



Maggie DeSantis

neighborhood, for example, while pulling back that work in a distressed neighborhood. In turn, the distressed neighborhood might see more bulk trash collection or be targeted for more demolitions or property acquisitions.

The second piece of the strategy in the three demonstration areas will see targeted investment from federal funds, nonprofits and the philanthropic community.

"Residents, city services, federal dollar programs, foundation support ... it all has to be stacked up and aligned," said Rip Rapson, president of the Troy-based **Kresge Foundation**. "I think the Kresge Foundation and other members of the foundation community will welcome that. It's an opportunity to see what happens when we try something fundamentally different to change trajectory of neighborhoods with considerable assets under considerable distress."

Rapson said he's heard the criticism that Bing's plan isn't different from previous plans to bolster neighborhoods, like former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's Next Detroit Neighborhood Initiative.

"My response is that the context is entirely different from what it was," he said. "The rapidity of disinvestment in neighborhoods, the threat to their long-term stability, the opportunity to deploy federal dollars in a different way, the increasing recognition on the part of philanthropy that this is an administration that is trying to play above the table and engage the philanthropic community -- all make this a very different circumstance."

But some community development advocates are left wondering how they fit into the picture.

Maggie DeSantis, president of the **Warren/Conner Development Coalition**, is heading the Lower Eastside Action Plan, a foundation-funded effort to develop a long-term land use plan for Detroit's lower east side.

Before the mayor's announcement last week, DeSantis said she and the other seven community groups working on the LEAP plan had been under the impression that the city was prepared to integrate LEAP's work with the Detroit Works Project.

"We were busy scheduling a meeting, and it got canceled," she said.

DeSantis said she and other neighborhood development advocates were invited to a presentation made by the consultants who did the neighborhood analysis before Bing's big announcement was made.

"We were told our feedback would matter, so we said this was premature, people are going to be upset, don't do it," she said. "Wait till you can do a thoughtful and more thorough process."

Still, DeSantis said, LEAP organizers are hopeful that the outcomes of the plan will be incorporated into Detroit Works.

"We choose to believe this is the first part, and that the long-term will be sensible and integrate the LEAP project," she said. "For the city to not embrace and participate in this is a huge opportunity loss ... but we will not let it happen."

Tom Goddeeris, executive director of the **Grandmont Rosedale Community Development Corp.**, is trying to

figure out what life outside of a demonstration zone looks like.

"We have the feeling as a neighborhood that some of the resources we utilize will potentially be available," he said. "We have (federal Neighborhood Stabilization) target areas in Rosedale and North Rosedale, and we intend to apply for funding with (the third round of) NSP, and we had asked if target areas going to be changed to align with these. So it's not like places outside these three target areas are left high and dry."

Still, Goddeeris said, "We're sort of disappointed by it, but we're going to keep doing what we do. There are still resources we're going to try to get from the city, and we've got a lot of resources helping us that aren't coming from the city."

But he says there's merit in the short-term intervention.

"I think the idea of classifying neighborhoods is that you can align your strategies with the type of neighborhood," he said. "A steady neighborhood might need more code enforcement where a distressed neighborhood might need more demolition. So they're not, for example, building a new house in a distressed neighborhood that's just going to be distressed two years from now. As a general idea, that's a good idea. That's what we thought in the end Detroit Works was going to be about, getting your neighborhood aligned with what it needs most, not spreading everything thinly across the whole city."

One concern Kurt Metzger, executive director of data clearinghouse **Data Driven Detroit**, points to is a lack of understanding about how the Detroit Works consultants arrived at their recommendations.

"If we're going to talk about collaborations in these neighborhoods and community engagement, there have been several different efforts looking at neighborhoods in the city, one of which was the Detroit Works Project consultants doing something, the (**Community Development Advocates of Detroit**) effort which has been very publicly driven, very shared and open, compared to this city effort that's been closed, and run by Detroit Works with seemingly little input from outside," he said.

Metzger said it's impossible to critique the plan without understanding the methodology.

"You can classify neighborhoods and draw maps, all we're asking is some transparency as to what went into defining these areas," he said. "What do these categories mean, what are the variables that drove these classifications, who did it and how does it compare to other work that has been done? It's a transparency of methodology is what we're asking for."

While short-term intervention can work on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis, a long-term plan must recognize that the city is more than the sum of its parts, Rapson said.

"Our belief is that those two things (short-term and long-term planning) are very closely connected, how you model different ways of delivering services, aligning federal resources, providing incentives for residents to become more fully engaged in the life of the community, all of those things are part and parcel of how does this relate to a city that at the end of the day has to be a city, not a collection of discrete neighborhoods."

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