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Detroit overstaffed compared to other cities

Some push layoffs, but Bing says that would impact city services

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Detroit —Detroit's work force hasn't shrunk with its population, leaving the cash-strapped city with far more employees than most comparably sized cities.

The 12,900 workers in the Bing budget proposed this month is much more than similar size Midwestern cities including Indianapolis and Columbus, Ohio, and double much more populous cities including San Jose, Calif.

Bing has resisted calls for mass layoffs, saying Detroit's population exodus in the past 10 years was fueled in part by shrinking services.

The mayor said he owes it to residents to focus on the city's long-term viability and fix structural changes like pension and medical costs that threaten to consume half the budget by 2015.

"Those who argue for slashing and burning have yet to present a cost savings or a projected service impact," said Bing, who wants to switch new employees to a 401(k) type savings system from a defined benefit pension and require union workers to pay 20 percent more for health care.

But others, including Council President Pro Tem Gary Brown, have said the city that faces a \$155 million deficit can't afford to keep such a large work force. The council begins budget deliberations Tuesday, and Brown is pushing for shedding at least 1,000 jobs.

"I'm a little disappointed we didn't do this last year. It should have been in last year's budget," said Brown, who added that 1,000 layoffs would save \$75 million.

"At some point, the planning has to end, and we have to start implementing some of these changes," Brown added. "If not, we're going to be bankrupt."

"If we took a hard look at each department, they all have expanded to become specialties. They are going to have to become generalized and do more than one job. That will allow us to become more efficient."

Chief Operating Officer Chris Brown called the plans for 1,000 layoffs "cheap talk." Finance Director Tom Lijana said cuts cannot be made in one fell swoop.

"You can't do this in one year," Lijana said. "For the city to gain a benefit from that, for all practical purposes, that has to come out of the general fund. Now I'm going to be picking up your garbage once a month. I'm only going to turn on power to your house every once in a while. You just can't do that."

Serving empty spaces

U.S. census figures show Detroit lost 25 percent of its population to 713,777 since 2000. Some areas of the city lost 30 percent or more of their residents, including a 51 percent drop in at least one east side neighborhood, the State Fair area near Eight Mile and Woodward.

But city employees make police and fire runs, mow grass and demolish houses in an area that covers 139

square miles — three times the size of San Francisco (47 square miles) but far smaller than cities including Indianapolis (373 square miles) and Jacksonville, Fla. (874 square miles.)

That's causing Detroit officials to explore shutting down city streets and water lines, and reducing garbage pickup in some areas as a part of a plan to reshape the city. A Detroit Works Project analysis said expenditures have exceeded revenues in five of the last eight years, and departments, including transportation, and the Coleman A. Young Municipal Airport are a drain on the budget.

Work force has declined

Detroit, which levies a 65.4-mill tax on houses, has the nation's fourth-largest tax burden — among 51 large cities — for those making \$50,000 or more. There are also more than 100,000 vacant parcels.

"You can talk about cutting back, but it really needs a thorough study of each department and what their necessity is in terms of overall services," said Kurt Metzger, a demographer with Data Driven Detroit.

"It's critical that the city be able to really justify almost every position in city government. Every department will have to justify their existence and audit of their staff. You need to really look at yourselves and see, is this work force necessary?"

Some observers have suggested the city cannot survive without serious cuts in service ranks. But city officials say the cuts have to be done in a way that doesn't harm services. The city's approach is to reduce vacancies and achieve job losses through attrition. Vacancies are down about 50 percent over the last two years, officials said.

Over the last decade, the number of city jobs has steadily decreased.

In the 2000-01 budget, then-Mayor Dennis Archer budgeted for 20,642 city employees. That's about 700 fewer jobs than during the mid-1980s under Mayor Coleman A. Young.

By 2004-05, then-Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick budgeted for 18,743 positions. In the 2007-08, it was 15,276.

Brown said the question is how to reduce staffing levels responsibly. "You can't take essential city services," he said. "We're going to take that (employee level) down and become more efficient. That's the challenge we face."

Political analyst Eric Foster said comparing Detroit's job numbers to other cities' is "a little far flung" because their services vary widely. But, he added, the issue isn't how many workers the city employs, but how they are deployed.

"Detroit needs more police (officers), but (the city) may not need one employee in public lighting, the cable commission or the building authority," Foster said.

"Once you start equating where the services should be rendered based on the demand and need for services, 12,000 may be the perfect number if people are allocated equitably.

"It blows my mind we're still trying to head count among 43 departments. It's not sustainable. If you're down to the core, you can justify (the) people because you're increasing your outputs."

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