

Officials seek to prevent discussion at meetings on downsizing of Detroit

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Nearly a thousand Detroit residents packed the Greater Grace Temple on the city's northwest side Tuesday night for the first of a series of public hearings on Mayor David Bing's plans to restructure and shrink the city. The huge turnout clearly surprised the meeting organizers, and the mood of the crowd was generally critical, if not outright hostile, to the mayor's plan, which he has entitled "The Detroit Works Project."

Widespread opposition was sparked by reports that city services will be cut off in selected areas—those with large numbers of vacant or abandoned homes—in order to force residents to move. The land freed up by this process would be turned over to favored businessmen to exploit for residential, commercial or even agricultural purposes.

Bing and his aides refused to answer any questions about the proposed restructuring, claiming that no decisions had been made, and that the hearings were being held to gather input from the public.

Even before people had finished streaming into the huge church, the meeting was divided up into 10 separate "breakout sessions," each attended by city employees and contractors serving as "facilitators" and "scribes," as well as technicians who recorded remarks made by each individual.

The purpose of this elaborate pretense of consultation was to prevent any confrontation between city officials and residents angered by the downsizing proposals. No city official addressed the assembled crowd initially, and when the breakout sessions were announced, several people rose from their seats to oppose the procedure.

"We didn't come here for a breakout session," one woman said, to considerable applause. "You don't want to listen to the people," another shouted out. "This is not what we came here to do."

Many of those attending decided to stay in the main hall rather than go to the breakout sessions as instructed. The meeting organizers responded by rolling out partition walls that divided the main hall from floor to ceiling, cutting up the crowd into smaller groups, each penned up and separated from the others, to prevent any collective discussion.

Mayor Bing dropped in on some of the workshops, either standing on the sidelines, or in at least one case taking the microphone and briefly responding to questions and comments. In the session observed by a WSWS reporter, Bing was accompanied by Saul Green, the deputy mayor, as several Detroit residents voiced their objections to the downsizing plan.

One worker complained about the time frame for the city plan. "We need something in a year, not 20 years," he said, emphasizing the urgency of the crisis in the poorest city in America.

Another addressed Bing directly, asking, "Why are we talking about shrinking our city, instead of growing our city." This remark drew widespread applause, and compelled Bing to respond.

His comments were a mixture of sophistry, outright lies and condescension. The plan did not involve "shrinking" the city, he claimed, because the city would still consist of 139 square miles, albeit organized and structured differently than today. He did not address the fact that city services—public safety, utilities, garbage collection, schools—were being drastically cut back.

Bing claimed that his administration was only in the initial stages of work on the downsizing plan. "Internally, we're pulling together ideas," he continued, "but we don't want to impose these ideas on you." At a later point, however, he admitted that city agencies had already begun to act, including targeting

homes and neighborhoods for demolition.

In response to another hostile question, Bing bristled, telling an older worker, “Don’t get so excited. Don’t think this is the only meeting to express your concerns and ideas.” He went on in this arrogant vein, declaring, “We’re getting the questions, but I can’t answer them. Don’t make it a bitch session. Be constructive with your ideas.”

The Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Michigan state legislature, D’Artagnan Collier, attended the meeting but, like most of the Detroit residents there, was denied any opportunity to speak.

A team of campaign supporters distributed a leaflet outside the church, branding the public hearings a fraud, and warning that “Mayor David Bing is moving ahead with plans made behind closed doors by top bankers and corporate CEOs to cut off services and shut down entire neighborhoods.” (See, “A program to rebuild, not downsize Detroit”)

Church officials called in Wayne County sheriff’s deputies, who were patrolling the parking lot, to force a halt to the leaflet distribution, first at the entrance of the church itself, then later at the driveway entrance to the church parking lot, on the public sidewalk on Seven Mile Road. The pastor of the mega-church, Bishop Charles Ellis, III, is a top Bing ally and the chairman of the advisory task force for his Detroit Works Project.

Despite this harassment and violation of democratic rights, Collier and his supporters spoke to many people, both going into the meeting and at the breakout sessions.

Edith and Ronald Colston, who live in North Rosedale Park, objected to the way the meeting was run. Ronald retired from Chrysler after working for 37 years, while Edith still works at the auto company.

Edith said, “I believed it would be a united forum, not division. Their intent was to divide and conquer. It’s not an open dialogue.”

She said that the work force at her plant, which makes axles, has been cut from 1,900 to only 300. They are now facing a transfer to the plant in Marysville, 30 miles outside the city. “Our people have nowhere to go,” she said, and the mayor and city council were doing nothing about it.

Brian Johnson, a Wayne State student, also criticized the breaking up of the meeting into small groups, calling it “undemocratic.” He continued, “They should

have opened the main area of the church where people could set up posts and ask their questions.”

Tony Bullock, a local resident, said, “Me and my wife came here, expecting a forum; we didn’t come here to be broken up into sessions. We’ve been deceived, hoodwinked.”

He criticized the current downsizing plans. “This isn’t like the auto industry,” he said, “these are people we are talking about.” The attitude of the government, he said, is “cut them out...get rid of them.”

David Porter, a young security guard who lives in northwest Detroit, said, “I’m not even sure what they thought they were going to do here. I expected there would be some real dialogue. Most people know what’s wrong with the city’s policy. We’ve got high insurance rates and property taxes.”

David, a homeowner in the Evergreen/Six Mile area, was concerned over last week’s firestorm that hit neighborhoods in both the east side, north central and northwest of the city. “A lot of people saw this coming,” he said, referring to the hundreds of power lines downed by the heavy windstorm, which set off the fires.

“I personally asked DTE to trim trees that were hanging over power lines, and they said they don’t do that anymore,” he said.



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