

Democratic administration pushes ahead with Detroit downsizing

A reporting team
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Thousands of Detroit residents turned out Thursday and Saturday for public hearings on the radical downsizing of the city being proposed by Mayor David Bing in the interests of big business and in conjunction with the Obama administration.

Some 1,300 people crowded into two auditoriums at the American Serbian Memorial Hall Thursday, in the north central part of the city, and another 1,000 at Whittier Manor on the city's east side Saturday.

Unlike the first meeting, which was immediately broken up into small group workshops, preventing any full-scale discussion, the latest two meetings were conducted as plenary sessions, with people able to raise questions from the floor and make comments to the city officials.

Also unlike the first meeting, there was no attempt to bar the distribution of political material to residents coming into the meetings. Organizers had called the police to block such distribution during the first session.

Both actions were taken to protect Mayor Bing and his aides from public criticism. They had to be abandoned in the face of widespread hostility, particularly at the first meeting, where many residents vocally denounced the substitution of "breakout sessions" for an actual hearing where residents would be able to confront top officials directly.

The series of five public hearings will be completed by Wednesday, September 22. After that, the actual decisions will be made in consultation with a 55-person advisory committee hand-picked by Bing, packed with Democratic Party loyalists and representatives of big business, the union bureaucracy, and various churches. The plan will then be road-tested at small neighborhood forums and then formally adopted. It is expected to include the effective shutdown of city services in as much as 40 percent of the city, and the forced relocation of residents from those areas to be abandoned.

The material assembled by the Detroit Works Project—the formal name of the Bing initiative—paints a devastating picture of the economic decline of Detroit and southeast Michigan as a whole. Among the conditions detailed in

brochures and graphs displayed at the meetings:

- Detroit has experienced a 60 percent population decline since its peak in 1950
- Michigan has lost 762,000 manufacturing jobs, many in the Detroit area
- Nearly half the population in the city is functionally illiterate
- The city's median household income is \$29,000, only \$7,000 above the official US poverty level
- There are 55,000 properties in foreclosure
- There is not a single grocery store chain operating in Detroit

These conditions are an indictment of the capitalist system. Detroit has generated untold profits for the capitalist class over the past 100 years, with hundreds of thousands of workers toiling under often brutal conditions, particularly in the auto plants that once covered the city. But the profit bonanza has gone to benefit a privileged financial elite, while the city has descended into unprecedented decay. Detroit is the first city in the modern era to pass the one million mark in population, and then fall back below it under the impact of industrial collapse.

In his remarks to the meetings Thursday and Saturday, Mayor Bing made it clear that he has no solutions to this crisis. He sought to blame the people of Detroit, for whom he has complete contempt. At one point he referred to the city as a "hellhole," a comment that no doubt expresses his real feelings. A multi-millionaire businessman after his professional basketball career, Bing moved from the wealthy suburb of Franklin back into the city only after he was prevailed upon to run for mayor, winning the election last year.

Bing blamed previous administrations for the conditions in Detroit, although the giant auto corporation and banks have played the dominant role in the city, regardless of the succession of mayors in Manoogian Mansion. Bing is himself a creature of this business elite, making millions as a subcontractor selling steel products to the auto industry, then promoted by them to take over the mayor's office after a

corruption scandal forced out Kwame Kilpatrick in 2009.

Bing repeatedly declared that the city government's role was to promote business profit, not serve the needs of the people. "Our job is to create an environment where entrepreneurs and businesses will want to invest," he said. "We want to win back the trust."

At one point during opening remarks Saturday, Bing said the purpose of government does not include the creation of jobs. "Yes, it is," shouted an audience member. "That's your opinion," the mayor replied arrogantly.

He singled out city workers for slander, saying that while he was told "workers were lazy, corrupt and don't want to do anything, I also know that 80 percent want to do the right thing." Translated into English, this suggests that Bing intends to get rid of at least 20 percent of city workers.

Bing also referred to city residents as "customers," leading to widespread grumbling in the audience that they were "citizens with rights," not someone's customer. Moreover, unlike customers of a department store, Detroit residents cannot just go somewhere else to shop. The city is where they live.

Despite the mayor's efforts to portray his administration as seeking "input" from the community, he and his aides reacted with indifference to complaints about the notorious unresponsiveness of city agencies. One worker said that he couldn't reach anyone at a city office about cutting weeds on his block, and demanded a cellphone number. A mayoral aide responded, "Well, I cannot possibly take hundreds of individual phone calls, and you will need to follow a process of contacting the community centers where you live."

An 80-year-old retired Chrysler worker named Ernie spoke up at one point saying, "I have lived in this city for 60 years and have seen many changes. I worked very hard for the things I have. In my neighborhood there are many older people living on the block, and it is important that we have street lights. I was attacked myself a number of years ago when the area was very dark. I called the city about the street lights being out for over two weeks now and have gotten no response. We try to keep our neighborhoods up, pay our taxes and do the best we can, but there is no assistance from the city."

Another resident, Margie, responded to Bing's plan to demolish 3,000 properties. "You talk about tearing down properties. The banks haven't helped people. You state in the material that 55,000 homes are in foreclosure and that we should expect more foreclosures. Why don't you come up with a program to assist people? Why not renovate some of these houses and make them affordable for people to live in? Why is it that no one wants to help the homeowners?" There was no reaction to this appeal.

D'Artagnan Collier, a founding member of the Committee

Against Utility Shutoffs and the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Michigan state legislature in the 9th district, on the city's northwest side, spoke from the floor at both Thursday's and Saturday's meetings. He rejected Bing's claim that there were no resources to meet the urgent needs of Detroit residents.

"It is a matter of who controls them and how they are distributed," Collier said. Nationally, he explained, "Billions of public tax dollars are used to bail out the banks, while education and public infrastructure are starved."

He pointed to the role of DTE Energy in utility shutoffs and in the collapse of power lines that touched off devastating fires throughout the city on September 7. Bing was a member of the DTE board of directors for 20 years before becoming mayor, and DTE chairman Anthony Earley headed the fundraising for his campaign.

Collier, a city worker, criticized Bing's attack on his fellow public employees. "The change Mayor Bing refers to," he said, "is associated with cutting the deficit, which means cuts in public services and deterioration in the quality of life for most residents."

LaTonya Nelson, who heard Collier speak, told the candidate, "Just listening to you gives me an education as to what is going on with DTE. A lot of people are saying DTE did not react soon enough. What Bing is doing is a betrayal. The big picture is business, not the people."

Kenneth Reed, another city resident, said, "Bing is with Tony Earley. And he was a Tier 2 supplier to the Big Three. All of it was garbage. They think they can bamboozle people to thinking they will have an input when they have already decided what they want to do.

"I know that they already have plans. I was opposed to these plans earlier. Ten years ago Dennis Archer wanted to charge an entry fee to go to Belle Isle [the main city park]. They are putting together a Master Plan for Detroit. Young also supported it. Archer revived it and put in a half a million dollars.

"I believe what the city is doing is cutting services or reducing them to where people will feel compelled to move. I believe they plan to have land bank authorities that will sell the land off to developers. Detroit will be a modern-day Soweto."



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