

Ypsilanti, Michigan to make “dramatic” cuts to services

Naomi Spencer
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Ypsilanti, Michigan, like countless other industrial cities across the Midwest, is preparing to decimate basic services. In June, the city council will vote on a budget containing personnel cuts in the Department of Public Services, police and fire departments. The council is calling for “dramatic” cutbacks in all areas, including the introduction of a four-day workweek for non-emergency service departments.

The collapse of the auto industry and the housing market weigh heavily on the regional economy and have driven many Detroit-area municipalities like Ypsilanti into near-bankruptcy. The “business friendly” tax structure at every level of government has left local governments and school districts especially vulnerable to the ravages of the economic crisis.

In the last decade, Ypsilanti has gutted its city staff by one-third, a process that has only exacerbated depressed home values and population decline. Since 2000, the city’s population has declined by 13 percent, to just under 20,000.

At its height in the post-World War II boom, Ypsilanti was a thriving auto manufacturing hub in Detroit’s industrial corridor and an economic draw to poor Appalachian mining families and Deep South black workers. Massive historic buildings and homes abound as reminders of the high standard of living among the workforces of the auto industry and Eastern Michigan University. EMU, home to the first teachers’ college in the US outside of the 13 original colonies, is located in Ypsilanti.

Today, however, abandoned and blighted buildings pervade the neighborhoods and business zones, and one in three people live below the poverty line. Without including the seasonal doubling of population brought by the university, two in three residents are renters. According to 2010 Census Bureau data, the real unemployment rate approaches 40 percent, a rate

analogous to that of Detroit and Flint.

In a statement issued to residents before a May 8 vote on local tax millage measures, Ypsilanti Mayor Paul Schreiber stated that “the collapse in property values and tax revenues coupled with state spending cuts for cities have decimated Ypsilanti’s long-term structural deficit. The bottom line is this: we have reached the point where the city will be forced to cut police, fire and support services that we all depend upon unless the city develops a significant new source of revenue.”

“Everyone has to cut,” councilman Michael Bodary declared at a budget meeting May 10, after the millages were rejected. “No department can be immune.” Revenues have declined 2.6 percent in the last year; expenditures have dropped by 5.85 percent. General fund property tax revenues are projected to plummet by 30 percent from the 2010-level of \$7.2 million to \$5 million. State-provided revenue is projected to fall from the 2002 high of \$4 million to a mere \$1.3 million by 2017.

After years of reductions and consolidations, emergency services have been crippled. At the same time, economic distress has contributed to a steady rise in house fires, fatal accidents and crime.

The city may lay off six firefighters and one fire command officer. Firefighters at a May 29 city council meeting warned that this would dangerously reduce crews to only three firefighters per shift.

Last week, a house fire near downtown took forty minutes and the assistance of emergency crews from three neighboring municipalities to put out. Two residents were injured in the blaze. Scott Maddison, a lieutenant with 16 years at the department, told the council, “I am number five to get laid off if that makes any difference. We have had three structural fires in the past three weeks.” He added, “The traditional term, ‘do more with less’—I hate that term. We literally do that, do more with less.” Firefighters cautioned that without the funding, the

department would return to the conditions of the 1960s, when fatal residential fires were far more frequent. The city averages some 40 apartment fires per year, firefighters explained, primarily due to the consequences of poverty, high bills and landlords unwilling to turn on the heat.

The fire department has been cut multiple times in the past decade. Yet parallel cuts to emergency dispatchers and ambulance services has meant that fire stations are increasingly serving as first responders in medical emergencies and road accidents. The fire department has requested grant aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to make up for some \$700,000 of proposed cuts, though the grant is not guaranteed. When asked by council-members about the status of the grant application Tuesday, Fire Chief John Ichesco said FEMA “will no longer answer my emails... We are in a priority [ranking system] and they won’t tell us where we’re at.”

“Long-term it’s a transition into younger people with less benefits,” Ichesco told the *Ypsilanti Courier* May 24.

“It’s a fundamental change from what people are used to,” councilman Peter Murdoch said of the fire service cuts. “It’s going to change how we do business.”

In the last ten years, Ypsilanti has cut its police force in half, from 58 officers to 29. The department is fielding more emergency calls than ever; in the past year, police received 6,000 more calls than in 2009, according to the *Courier*. “I’ve never seen it, in my 20 years—the cuts we’ve made,” Police Chief Amy Walker told the paper. The police department is now considering closing its station lobby, curtailing access to public records, and only responding to 911 calls. The mayor has also said police may no longer attend neighborhood meetings or special events.

“We’re dipping into reserves and cutting public safety at the same time,” Schreiber told the *Ann Arbor News*. “We already cut the police department quite a bit and we really got nowhere else to go.”

Other cuts on the table include the outright elimination of sanitation services. Residents would be billed directly for garbage pickup, a move that sanitation workers warn will result in overflowing municipal dumpsters, garbage in the river and huge piles of waste due to the seasonal rental movement. The city is also considering charging residents a “stormwater utility fee.”

Further cuts—and the municipality’s insolvency—are already looming. “The two-year budget doesn’t have the things we’re looking at over the long term,” Schreiber said. “The cuts to the fire department is just one step, and

the next step after that is more cuts, and what’s next after that step down that road—hopefully we don’t have to find out.”

The city’s school districts are also once again making drastic cuts to staff, wages and facilities. Willow Run School District, on the east side of the city near the historic Willow Run Ford assembly plant, and the Ypsilanti Public School District (YPS) are both threatened with a state takeover and the appointment of an emergency financial manager if they do not comply with “Deficit Elimination Plans” that mandate millions of dollars in cuts. YPS claims that its debt will rise to \$9.95 million by the end of the school year if drastic cuts are not made. YPS and Willow Run are in talks to consolidate, a move that will trigger mass layoffs.

The two districts are among 48 others in the state with huge deficits. Last year, Michigan cut funding for K-12 education from \$7,316 to \$6,846 per student. Schools that meet “best practices” under the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program and its state-level counterpart—such as privatization and health care cost-cutting—can qualify for a small pool of additional funds.

Willow Run’s school board voted earlier in the month to lay off 26 para-educators and cut pay for the remaining staff. Those to lose their jobs work in Head Start and special education. The *Ypsilanti Courier* reported May 22 that administrators have demanded that para-educators at the “top of the unit’s pay scale” take a salary cut from \$19,468—poverty wages—to a meager \$14,091.

The Ypsilanti school board has proposed closing at least one elementary school and laying off at least 97 staff, including 32 special education teachers. More than 50 para-professionals have already been issued pink slips.

The board also plans to cut transportation by \$600,000 and eliminate \$250,000 from the athletics programs. The district has closed three elementary schools and one middle school in the past decade, pushing many classes to well over 30 and integrating students with special needs into classrooms without staff to assist them. In 2010, YPS approved a plan to slash pay for bus drivers, privatize transportation, and eliminate a third of the district’s teachers. The cuts have resulted in a hemorrhaging of the public schools into charter schools.



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