# Detroit plans to sell off closed fire stations

**Bryan Dyne**
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Eight vacant buildings once operated by the Detroit Fire Department?seven fire stations and the former firehouse headquarters?are being sold by the city of Detroit to private investors and developers to be transformed into restaurants, wineries or micro-distilleries in an effort to raise money for the city. The minimum bid for the fire stations are $637,000 while the former headquarters is being sold for $1.25 million.

It is not yet clear who has bought the fire stations or for what price, though it is known that Southfield, Michigan developer Walter Cohen has plans to purchase the former headquarters and turn it into a boutique hotel. He plans to have eighty upscale rooms and a Cajun restaurant on the first floor. Cohen has previously been involved in the gentrification of the Park Shelton residential buildings.

The stations to be sold include Ladder Nos. 8, 12, 16 and 38 and Engine Nos. 10, 18 and 49. Engine No. 49 in particular, is in an area that is targeted for depopulation, where city services such as fire, sanitation and street lighting will simply no longer be supplied to the residents. Once all the people have moved out, the area will be turned into an ecological “green zone, allowing wild foliage to return.

Putting firehouses up for sale is one of the initial steps taken to restructure Detroit in the name of generating profits for Detroit's bondholders. All of the city assets?including the world-renowned masterpieces at the Detroit Institute of Art and the animals at the Detroit Zoo?are being valued and considered for sale by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. The unelected official?appointed by the state’s Republican governor?has the support of local Democrats, including Mayor David Bing who first proposed selling the fire stations.

Over the last five years, the number of firefighters has been reduced by 500 and operational companies cut by 20. No new equipment has been bought and current equipment has been allowed to decay. On any given day there are also several stations on temporary shutdowns or “brownouts” to save money.

The emergency manager himself has not yet cut any aspect of the fire department. There is a sense however, of waiting for the other shoe to drop, especially in light of the impending Chapter 9 bankruptcy decision Orr is slated to make at the end of June. Moreover, he has stated he will impose a new contract on the firefighters by July 1. When asked about the contents of the contract by the firefighters union, a member of Orr's team responded, “You know what we're always after, you can figure it out for yourselves.”

Indeed, like every other city service, the fire department is a city asset that is looked at not for its critical social function, but for its cash value. The workforce is going to be slashed and wages and pensions cut as departments are sold off to satisfy developers and pay back Detroit's creditors. All the while, response times to fires are higher and higher and the equipment degrades further leading to more casualties and fatalities both for firefighters and the people they are attempting to save.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to firefighters around the city about the fire station closings and the cuts to fire services.

A firefighter from the station housing Engine No. 1 said, “When you close down fire stations, it takes the department longer to respond to fires. Multiple fires are even more of a problem. There are fires all the time that happen near a closed or browned out station. It means more people die from fires.

“It's all part of the cuts. The city council and the mayor are the ones who made the plans to sell the fire stations, but we all know that the emergency manager is okay with it and that he's going to cut more from us. He changed our contract already by taking away our longevity and he's getting ready to impose his contract on us come July. We already pay $60 every two weeks for health insurance now and we didn't five years ago. What's next?”

The firefighter then commented on the equipment of Detroit. “All the rigs are very old. The city hasn't bought new ones in years. Ladders are supposed to be checked every year but they never are unless something happens

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like if there's a death in a house fire and sometimes not even then.”

At the Dexter Avenue fire station, firefighters related the costs of the health care cuts. “Because of the cuts in health care benefits, one of our guys was unable to get his operation when it was scheduled. When he went in to have back surgery, they informed him that the city had not paid their health care obligations and he had to wait. Eventually the surgery was performed but he was left in pain for a number of weeks. What if this was a life and death issue?”

Firefighters at a station near Wayne State University commented that, “The stations are being sold because all the city is concerned with is the $15 billion they have to come up with, even though they got us in debt in the first place. They don't care what the costs are. It's a cover to bankrupt the city. They are working for the corporations and are involved in outright embezzlement.

“None of the equipment is regularly certified. There's no one in MIOSHA (Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration) anymore that actually inspects equipment. The only people that work for them are the ones who will take payoffs to look the other way.

“We had to cover a fire a couple of days ago where one of the newer guys was really injured as a result of unusable equipment. We were putting out a fire but we didn't have an operational bucket, which means that we can't tackle a fire from above, safe from collapsing walls. We had to use ladders. In the process, a wall collapsed, pinning one of the two new guys, who's not even done with his classes. And they get paid poverty wages. Both are on food stamps.

“From what I've read, conditions are similar in every other country, especially Greece. No workers anywhere have escaped the cuts. Something has to be done. It's gotten to the point where revolution is the only solution.”

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