

Detroit Blight Task Force surveys neighborhoods in preparation for mass demolition

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The Detroit Blight Task Force (DBTF) is initiating an extensive survey of city properties this week, coordinated by Data Driven Detroit (DDD).

The survey will focus on the “hardest hit” areas of the city, according to DDD director Erica Raleigh, and will evaluate properties in a 23-square-mile “micro-hood” sub-region, providing information to determine which areas will be targeted for building demolition.

The survey is the first step in a restructuring of the city being prepared by the ruling elite and the political establishment. The Obama administration’s \$300 million federal aid package to Detroit, unveiled in September, includes \$150 million for “blight removal and redevelopment.” In June, Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr submitted a proposal to city creditors that included \$500 million for blight removal through 2019. According to *Crain’s Detroit*, total blight removal costs may grow to \$1.5 billion.

A new round of draconian “anti-blight” laws are being prepared in the state legislature that will empower the DBTF to force residents off of their property. The laws will make it easier for the DBTF to invoke “eminent domain,” compensating residents at 125 percent of the market value of their homes (in “blighted” neighborhoods, this can be extremely low).

“This should wake up anybody,” State Senator Virgil Smith, Democrat of Detroit, remarked to the *Detroit News*. “If we can get these properties out of folks’ hands quicker and hold them accountable with real consequences, then we can turn around property quicker to responsible land owners.”

The DBTF has three members who were appointed by the federal government: Glenda Price of the Detroit Public Schools Foundation, Dan Gilbert of Quicken

Loans, and Linda Smith of U-Snap-Bac.

The board members have insisted publicly on the necessity of decisive action to clear blighted areas.

“We have to get it all down,” Gilbert said to reporters last month.

“Maybe I’m out of my mind, which I am for various reasons,” Gilbert said. “You get these structures down and, I mean, all of them, not most of them, all of them.”

“Once we can get that done, you’re going to have open pieces of land and you’re going to have, more importantly, open optimism,” Gilbert said during the Techonomy Detroit conference at Wayne State University, which was co-hosted by Bruce Katz, vice president of the Brookings Institution.

“I was at the White House a couple weeks ago. We were talking to several secretaries in the cabinet about this very issue,” Gilbert said. “There is money available to do this. It’s just a matter of getting the infrastructure in place and getting ourselves in a position to make it happen.” Gilbert suggested that the city erect a scoreboard downtown to register the number of buildings razed.

“It has to move quickly. Blight doesn’t stand still,” Glenda Price told the *Detroit News*.

Price left no room for doubt about who the real power on the task force is. “[Gilbert] is not a patient man,” Price said. “We’re not going to spend a long time navel-gazing.”

Gilbert is also aggressively buying up prime real estate downtown as part of his efforts to restructure the city. The *New York Times* described Gilbert’s massive investment in downtown Detroit as “one of the most ambitious privately financed urban reclamation projects in American history...if this area turns around no one

will profit quite like Mr. Gilbert.” Gilbert and companies owned by Gilbert now control nearly 40 buildings in downtown Detroit, for a total of 8 million square feet.

In a November 2013 article, the *New York Times* highlighted the ambitious plans of US ruling groups to remake American cities in their own interests through a process of “creative destruction.” The *Times* wrote: “Bulldozing of city blocks is a source of anguish...But for Baltimore, as for a number of American cities in the Northeast and Midwest that have lost big chunks of their population, it is increasingly regarded as a path to salvation.

“For many cities urban planning has often become a form of creative destruction...Officials are tearing down tens of thousands of vacant buildings, many habitable, as they seek to stimulate economic growth”, the *Times* commented.

Similar demolition plans are underway across Michigan and the US. Mayor David Bing has already launched his own demolition initiative, which is set to bring down at least 10,000 buildings by the beginning of 2014, and the city is in the process of tearing down Brewster-Douglass public housing.

Officials in Saginaw and Flint also launched new blight removal initiatives last month. Saginaw’s “Blight Blitz” project received \$11.2 million in state assistance for blight removal, while Flint received \$20.1 million.

“This is the largest single award of blight eradication money to Flint at one time and will be a big strike at the blight that undermines too many neighborhoods,” Flint Mayor Dayne Walling said in a statement.

The aid packages are part of a broader US Treasury Department program that authorized Lansing to disperse funds from its share of the Troubled Asset Relief Program’s Hardest Hit Fund to five Michigan cities, including \$3.7 million to Pontiac, \$2.5 million to Grand Rapids, and \$52.3 million to Detroit. The Hardest Hit fund was supposedly established to supply aid to homeowners who were negatively impacted by the housing crisis.

The US ruling class has used deindustrialization as a weapon against the working class. As an historic center of workers’ militancy, Detroit has been a central target of the counterrevolution waged by the capitalist class since the 1970s.



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