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Downsizing city could raise Detroit from ruins

FRANK BECKMANN

Almost 40 years ago, former Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh considered the business flight from the city and deadpanned that he planned trips to "Detroit's sister cities -- Nagasaki and Pompeii."

A turn of the century later, another Detroit mayor is trying to rebuild from ruins, and he's willing to take extreme action to change the landscape.

Dave Bing says he has data indicating up to 80,000 of the 350,000 buildings in Detroit are vacant or ramshackle. He wants to rid the city of those structures and transplant any residents who live in those neighborhoods considered beyond repair.

"If we don't do it, you know this whole city is going to go down," Bing told me this week. "If they stay where they are, I absolutely cannot give them all the services they require."

Bing acknowledged the difficulty ahead in choosing "winners and losers" among Detroit's neighborhoods and he knows court challenges will be forthcoming.

But he's beginning to garner support.

Funding and other assistance is being pledged by the Kresge and Skillman foundations. Even a one-time opponent of such citizen dislocation is supporting the mayor.

Six years ago, noted Detroit area eminent domain attorney Alan Ackerman led a successful effort to overturn a state Supreme Court decision that allowed Detroit to uproot residents of 1,300 homes, 140 businesses, six churches and a hospital so GM could build its Poletown plant in the 1980s.

But Ackerman says he supports Bing's efforts to restructure the city and believes the mayor will win all legal battles in spite of a constitutional amendment making it tougher for governments to seize private property.

Ackerman argues the city will win this battle on the basis of police and fire safety, since the amendment allows the elimination of "blight" if government can prove the land will be put to public use.

"If you have, on a four-square-mile area, two houses, the police ... can't protect those houses

...when there are other areas that have dense populations ... that don't have adequate police protection because police are over at the empty lots," Ackerman said.

Ackerman notes that Detroit residents on the relocation hit list might voluntarily move.

This is because the Constitution requires they be paid 125 percent of taxable value for their property plus moving costs.

Former Genesee County Treasurer Dan Kildee, who oversaw the land bank program that gobbled up tracts in Flint through property tax delinquencies, warns that Detroit is headed for trouble if it tries to determine "who the winners and losers are."

"It must be totally voluntary," Kildee told me.

You'll have to excuse Detroiters if they are skeptical of this latest grand plan.

But they have little to lose.

If Nagasaki, at least, can recover from a nuclear bomb blast, Detroit's plight is not hopeless.

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