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Why Detroit Matters, Part V: A Vision and Mission for Detroit

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It is obvious that Detroit—one of the nation's most functional cities through the 1950s--has experienced a massive erosion of its infrastructure, talent pool, innovation capacity and vitality. There is also sufficient evidence that while Detroit continues to decline, some other cities have shown that comprehensive resurgence is possible. What we gleaned from some of these cities is that resurgence is possible only when a city, its residents and those whose policies can affect the future of the city are collectively strategic and committed to a turn around. In other words, all hands must be on deck in order for Detroit to regain its stature among American cities.

The stars are lining up for Detroit at this point: a new administration, a large number of organizations advocating change, strong Foundation commitment, city residents motivated about the plight of the Detroit, renewed national interest in urban areas, an emerging aggressive urban policy platform coming out of Washington, D.C., and the high degree of likelihood that more resources will be available for targeted programs aimed at urban resurgence. However, what we have learned from such cities as Pittsburg, PA; Philadelphia, PA; Boston, MA; and Minneapolis, MN, is that each of these have fully explored their assets, by leveraging such assets to achieve bold and audacious visions--visions previously thought to be unattainable. In other words, this is the time for Detroit to become bold and visionary.

With respect to boldness, Detroit's future vision must include an identity of uniqueness and distinction, not only domestically, but also internationally. At the local level, for the City of Detroit to be successful, its new course must be bold enough to restore the faith of city residents in the future. They must be convinced that progressive actions can lead to huge success, so that whatever sacrifices they are required to make can be made more readily. This relates to the issues of mindset for prosperity. The tendency in Detroit and many other cities to think of progress as a zero-sum game must be overcome. City residents owe themselves a vibrant future and such can only happen when they buy in to this concept.

Given the current fiscal condition of the State of Michigan, Detroit must be able to convince Michigan's residents that the state cannot be successful unless Detroit is, and that an investment in the city's future is an investment in Michigan's future success. This statewide commitment is necessary in order to restore Detroit's stature as Michigan's prime city. State residents must feel the excitement of the people in Detroit and be convinced that Detroit is on the move. In other words, Detroit leadership and people must help to shape the future perception of the state's residents.

Detroit's plan must also convey the notion that it can regain its national relevance. The nation needs highly functional places with high productivity, whose growth will help carry it through this very difficult economic time. In doing so, city leadership and residents have to admit that certain aspects of Detroit--which were relevant in the past--are no longer relevant in building a new first-class city. New infrastructure is needed that is outside the toolboxes of many local officials involved in urban revitalization. Detroit has to make the feds feel that investing in the city is in the best interest of the nation. There may be an opportunity to receive federal funds to support critical projects in the city. For example, the \$2.85 million grant that Southeast Michigan has just been awarded by the [USHUD Sustainable Communities Planning Grant Program](#). Some of the projects have already been identified in a previous article in the series.

The City of Detroit and its surrounding counties already represent more than half of the state's population. By leveraging the assets of Detroit, the state and nation can help build a model for the comprehensive turn-around of cities. The fundamental basis for Detroit's historical emergence will not be the basis for its resurgence. Detroit's resurgence will require out-of-the-box thinking and strategies. In other words, Detroit has to develop its own home-grown idea and vision of where it wants to be by 2020, 2030, 2050, and beyond. This would require all relevant organizations and

governments working together to craft a direction for the city that can be used to bring local residents along.

Uniqueness is important. Simply competing with other U.S. cities will not be the best way to move forward. The best way to move forward is to help create a city whose vision is so unique that it drives a whole new paradigm for how cities look at themselves nationally. With the deindustrialization of America has come a massive deindustrialization and exodus of Detroit residents. So, the key platforms upon which to base Detroit's future economy cannot be tied to the industrial model for progress. Detroit has to redefine itself by redefining its targets.

One of the key things that Detroit has to do is to intensify its efforts to market the city as part of an international strategy to make it a global destination point for talented people, as well as immigrants. The global financial and capital community must see Detroit as one of the best opportunities for investment globally--a place where the marginal productivity of capital and skilled workers far exceeds other places.

Vision

In light of the above, a plausible vision for Detroit is for the city to become "America's Green New Economy City." It must be clean, spacious, green and "cool," and feature the precursors to the recruitment and retention of the very ingredients of a 21st century urban success story. To achieve this vision, the city must be built on the principles of enhancing place assets and quality of life, placemaking to attract talent, the attraction of New Economy businesses, and the leveraging of every green opportunity possible. With an abundance of open space, and the potential for significantly more given the city's tear-down or demolition opportunities, Detroit is better positioned than any other city to achieve this vision.

Detroit's leaders and people need to decide for whom they are building the new city. Current residents of the city represent less than 50% of Detroit's optimal population, given current infrastructure. Future residents--while often an unobservable variable--have the potential to bring new ideas, culture and innovation. Without new talent and new innovators, the opportunities for city residents will probably remain limited. Without the current city residents, there is little potential for a cultural and market anchor for future residents. Balance is important in deciding whether to build a city for the future or a city for the past.

Obviously, the plan for the future of the city must attract new people, new money, new enterprises, new technologies, new development, all facilitated by a serious attempt at regional placemaking. Detroit has the obligation to put together the nation's best strategic growth plan. Efforts by the mayor's office and the foundation community to redefine the city through the efforts of Tony Griffin and [McKinsey & Company](#) may well be the first step in redefining the city.

The need for Detroit to be bold and visionary suggests the need for a strategic plan to drive the future of the city. The plan also has to be bold and unique, but at the same time it must resonate with all partners. In an attempt to begin identifying some key elements that could contribute to the city's success, I developed the concept of a Marshall Plan for Detroit, named after the original Marshall Plan from the years following World War II when America was called to the table to help with Europe's resurgence. In the rest of this article, I will summarize some of the elements that I believe are necessary to turn Detroit around.

The Marshall Plan for Detroit

The Marshall Plan for Detroit was developed in concert with key representatives of the city and partners in higher education. The plan was to integrate the activities of all the positive people and groups working on behalf of Detroit. The rationale behind the Marshall Plan is that if Michigan can become visionary, it can capture international, federal, state and philanthropic resources available for blighted places. From this perspective, in 2007, I unveiled the seven-year Marshall Plan for Detroit, which includes four essential elements that I will examine more in depth:

1. Jobs Today – Jobs Tomorrow Initiative;

2. Green Detroit Initiative;
3. Detroit Community/Neighborhood Development Initiative; and
4. Detroit-on-the-Move Initiative.

Jobs Today – Jobs Tomorrow Initiative

The Jobs Today – Jobs Tomorrow Initiative relates to how communities must focus on the creation of relevant jobs. The goals of the Initiative are to grow, retain and attract jobs related to the New Economy, the green economy, neighborhood investment and small enterprise. As part of this Initiative, there is a need to develop high-quality K–12 education and promote secondary education for all Detroit youth. It could also help position higher education to be a better long-term partner in economic development and support programs for job-changers and the unemployed.

Elements of the Initiative could include some of the following:

- Implementation of talent-attraction strategies, population attraction strategies, placemaking investments and “economic gardening” to bring in New Economy jobs;
- The expansion of the TIF (Tax Increment Financing) framework to the financing of placemaking projects and other creative and innovative real estate projects;
- Implementation of business attraction strategies showcasing an international image campaign as a green new-American city and leveraging affordability, space and low-cost properties, as well as utilizing the Emerging County analogy and maximizing the foreign investment stimulus program;
- Creating a university jobs program that repositions Wayne State University (WSU) as a first-class research institution, increases WSU graduation rates from 20% to 90%, funds a university-community Youth Corp program, includes tuition remission for Detroit residency, WSU Campus Expansion Fund and tuition differentials and TIFs;
- Creating an Office of New Americans that offers high net-worth and educated immigrants EB-5 visas and training (ESL), leveraging foreign students in targeting immigrants, creating an Immigrant Network program and connecting immigrants to venture funds and an Entrepreneurial Development program; and
- Transitioning those unemployed with a jobs program tied to community service.

Green Detroit Initiative

Greening Detroit is essentially the framework for leveraging the city’s infrastructure to create the persona of one of the world’s leading places in the green economy. The goals of the Green Detroit Initiative would be to grow, retain and attract jobs related to the green economy, make green infrastructure investments and focus on renewable energy resources and opportunities. As part of this Initiative, there is a need to create a new economic sector around food and agriculture; preserve, improve and connect green spaces; and enhance water resources, including water quality, water-based technologies and coastlines. Elements of the Initiative could include some of the following:

- Developing an aggressive citywide RPS and renewables initiative, securing grants for renewable energy and energy efficiency projects for homes, and increasing the development of renewable energy systems on brownfield sites;
- Investing in sustainable agriculture and food systems that incorporates a Sustainable Eastern Market, creating a Fund for Urban Agriculture and an Urban Agriculture Entrepreneurial program, making loans and grants available for urban food stores and promoting local food systems;
- Making and promoting Detroit as a “Green City” by utilizing the green and energy Czars already in house, creating citywide bike lanes and expanding greenways, designating a

special fuel tax district to help fund green infrastructure efforts, revamping the parks system, securing grants for green developers and entrepreneurs and investing in a neighborhood beautification fund; and

- Maintaining the city's waterways through investment in boating and waterfront access and creating a Redevelopment Fund for riverfront districts.

Detroit Community/Neighborhood Development Initiative

The resurgence of Detroit cannot center wholly on the city's downtown. There are many functional neighborhoods in the City of Detroit and they too can be a part of a refurbishing effort to enhance the future of the city. The goals of the Detroit Community/Neighborhood Development Initiative would be to integrate land use and economic development initiatives, preserve and strengthen the city's urban vitality and implement sustainable development projects, Smart Growth tenets and placemaking initiatives. As part of this Initiative, there is a need to explore asset-based neighborhood redevelopment and improve citywide quality of life (i.e., schools, city services, representative government, cultural amenities, etc.). Elements of the Initiative could include some of the following:

- Improving the image of Detroit as a green, diverse, entrepreneurial and tolerant city by addressing blight region-wide, rebuilding/revamping strategic points across the city (Stadium District, University Cultural Center, the downtown and waterfront areas) and uniform messaging/marketing at community, city and region-wide levels;
- Addressing the planning capacity related to the New Economy by revamping the property record system and retooling planning units;
- Land consolidating/banking for green persona by implementing a regional vacant land aggregation plan (City of Detroit, Metro areas and Wayne County), cleaning up and packaging of vacant properties and investing resources for vacant land transformation;
- Creating a Community Revitalization Fund to help fund NGOs to implement job creation for greening and rebuilding projects;
- Creating new opportunities for affordable housing by targeting abandoned property for revamping, eliminating tax abatements for new properties and packaging vacant homes and providing grants for recent college graduates;
- Increasing population attraction efforts to encompass placemaking strategies where young people live, marketing Detroit's affordability and creating both a domestic and international recruitment team;
- Increasing community support for entrepreneurs by encouraging urban supermarkets, e-infrastructure development and creating a social lending network;
- Improving schools (K–12); and
- Making communities safe and healthy environments to live, work and play.

Detroit-on-the-Move Initiative

The automobile heritage of Detroit may have prevented the city from taking an aggressive position on public transportation. Today, it is difficult to imagine a successful city without a solid public transportation and/or transit system. Goals and elements of the Detroit-on-the-Move Initiative could include the following:

- Designing and implementing a comprehensive, reliable and integrated regional transportation system;

- Securing federal monies to support a regional transit system and to implement private sector transit if public partners are elusive;
- Implementing a Non-Motorized Urban Transportation Master Plan;
- Achieving transit-oriented development;
- Preserving and improving existing road, bike, boating and other transportation infrastructure;
- Improving the pedestrian experience; and
- Revisiting the idea of utilizing revenues from Toll Roads.

Listed above are just a few examples of ideas and plans that would match the vision of the city. There are many more ideas that could be considered by decision makers in Detroit. The bottom line: "Is Detroit ready?" I believe that vision drives budgets, and programs drive structure. The big opportunity we face today is that the planning effort underway in the city is bold enough to excite relevant stakeholders and that its targeted initiatives are aligned well with the principles of the New Economy.

This concludes the series of articles on "Why Detroit Matters."