Rightsizing Detroit:

Looking Back, Looking Forward

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I. Introduction

Detroit is a great American city with an indomitable spirit and an unmatched legacy of manufacturing, from the Model T to the sounds of Motown. Yet since 1950, it has struggled with deepening poverty and population loss. Today the city holds just 900,000 people, down from nearly two million at its peak, and more than a third of its land lies vacant or abandoned.[1] While some middle-class and historic districts remain intact, nearly every square mile of the city has been affected by blight, and some neighborhoods have been erased altogether. Where the parish of St. Cyril once stood, proudly surrounded by factories and homes, there is now only urban prairie.[2]

Yet despite the continual loss of tax dollars and urban density as the population falls, Detroit's municipal government must still deliver services across the same 139 square miles of land (an area that could comfortably fit Manhattan, Boston, and San Francisco together within its boundaries with a few square miles to spare).[3] This has proven to be too great a challenge for the government to meet. Residents complain that low-priority police calls go unanswered for hours, burned out street lights take years to replace, and empty, unsecured buildings are sometimes left to stand for decades.

The crisis is now so severe and so enduring that policymakers are beginning to contemplate a once unthinkable proposal—planning for a less populous city for the foreseeable future. The idea is most often called rightsizing—a term coined in the late eighties to describe corporate restructuring involving layoffs.[4] Advocates say the city needs to assess each of its neighborhoods for density and viability. The least viable areas—those where only a handful of homes are left standing on each block—should be cleared entirely, and the residents should be relocated elsewhere in the city. The goal is

to create a more prosperous city with smaller residential areas and significantly more green space.[5] Backers include the Detroit Free Press editorial board, columnists for the Detroit News and Crain's Detroit Business, urban planners at Wayne State University and the University of Michigan, major philanthropies, several city council members, and perhaps most importantly, Mayor Dave Bing.[6]

Yet rightsizing Detroit remains largely unstudied in practice. No concrete plans have been drawn up yet at the citywide level, and many of the most pressing questions about rightsizing not only remain to be answered but also remain to be asked. By what criteria will areas be chosen for rightsizing, and what form will restructuring take? What rights and voice will residents have in the process? If land is cleared, what will it be used for? And perhaps most pressingly—how confident can we be that condensing Detroit will actually stabilize the city? What if "rightsizing" simply drives more people out?

Absent an official plan from the mayor's office, these questions are difficult to answer definitively. Nevertheless, by reviewing the overlooked history of rightsizing, from its origins in planning theory and public policy in the 1970s to the debate over rightsizing today, I intend to foster a more informed public discussion about the proposal and the implications it holds for the future of Detroit and its residents.

My paper proceeds in three parts. First, I argue that rightsizing originated in the 1970s as "urban triage" and "planned shrinkage," two related policies that were proposed in at least four Rust Belt cities (St. Louis, Cleveland, New York, and Detroit) but were never explicitly enacted due to a lack of political and popular support. Second, I turn to the contemporary example of Youngstown, Ohio, which, in 2003, became the first city to actually embrace shrinking to a smaller size. I contrast it with the previous examples,

showing how leaders in Youngstown were able to wed rightsizing to the new politics of sustainability and use marketing and public outreach to win political and popular support for the proposal. Third, turning to the contemporary debate in Detroit, I examine three reports that include innovative ideas for rightsizing the city in a sustainable and equitable manner: the "Detroit Residential Parcel Survey," the "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan," and the "Neighborhood Revitalization Strategic Framework."

Based on this review of rightsizing, I advocate a planning process that engages and respects the residents of Detroit, especially those who may be called upon to relocate to denser neighborhoods if rightsizing is pursued. Residents have legitimate concerns about the efficacy, ethics, and economics of rightsizing, and these must be addressed in an open, collaborative forum that engages the whole community. Such a process can yield dividends beyond generating political support for the proposal. The "Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan," the "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan," and the "Neighborhood Revitalization Strategic Framework" all demonstrate that rightsizing can be the impetus for a broader discussion of the city's future that empowers residents and changes the prevailing narrative of Detroit from one of decline to one of revitalization.

II. Triage and Planned Shrinkage

The planning concept now referred to as rightsizing first emerged in the early 1970s, an era, like the present one, of severe distress for American manufacturing cities and their residential neighborhoods. The severity and extent of neighborhood decline and the scarcity of resources to combat it led some planners to call for the use of "triage" to allocate community development grants. These planners favored redeveloping neighborhoods on the verge of decline rather than those that were already severely blighted in order to maximize the impact of available funding. Others went further, calling for the consolidation of neighborhoods through "planned shrinkage." They endorsed vacating the most blighted areas altogether and relocating the residents to more intact neighborhoods where the city could concentrate its resources. These two forerunners of rightsizing—triage and planned shrinkage—were not well received. In fact, both were fiercely contested, and the history of their genesis and rejection illustrates many of the challenges of planning for a smaller city today.

During the 1970s, American manufacturing cities struggled with population loss, property abandonment, declining tax revenue, and recession. Beginning in the 1950s, when federal highway construction enabled flight to the suburbs and factories began to automate production in earnest, once booming cities like Pittsburgh and Buffalo bled jobs and population. Between 1950 and 1970, Detroit alone lost 335,000 residents, or 18 percent of its population.[7] The flight continued after the violent civil disturbances of the 1960s, when racial tensions flared and whites moved in droves to newly built suburbs. As the 1970s began and a national recession took hold, the urban crisis reached an apex. Signs of urban decay, once confined to the inner city, became widespread. Factories that

once employed thousands now stood empty, as did the homes where the workers once lived, blighting the communities they left behind.[8]

In the absence of regional will to curb suburban growth, further population loss seemed inevitable. Wilbur R. Thompson, a pioneering urban economist at Wayne State University, explained the problem succinctly: "The outer ring is still expanding slowly and/or filling in, and the inner ring must therefore continue to lose population about equal in number to those housed in the buildings of suburbia."[9] In other words, housing was a zero-sum game, and suburbia would be the winner. The prediction was predicated on two assumptions: that aging metropolitan regions had ceased to grow in total population, and that most people would naturally gravitate to newer housing in suburbia over aging housing in the city. If these two conditions held true, then major manufacturing cities would keep losing population, just as they had since the 1950s.[10]

This spelled trouble for city government. When a city's population fell, the tax base fell in tandem as both businesses and homes became vacant. However, service obligations could not be cut as quickly. Even though there were fewer households in need of trash pickup and other services, the irregular geography of abandonment ensured that the cost of delivering services per person actually rose. Whole neighborhoods rarely declined uniformly. Even though several houses or apartment buildings on a block might be abandoned, the rest might still be fully occupied, meaning the whole block still had to be maintained. The trash still needed to be picked up and the snow still had to be plowed, even if there were only half as many people paying for the service as before.[11]

There were other costs that declining cities had to bear as well. As neighborhoods got older, sewers and streetlights needed to be repaired or replaced. The housing stock

needed upkeep, too, but few people could afford major home repair amidst a declining and uncertain economy. In areas with significant abandonment, the needs were greater. Jobs were scarce, crime was on the rise, and local commercial strips were faltering. Once welcoming homes now required demolition, having been damaged beyond repair by scavengers and the elements. Residents called for comprehensive government action to reverse the course. Yet federal support for such efforts was dwindling.

By the early 1960s, the federally funded urban renewal program had been largely discredited. In the 1950s, cities had used it at great expense to clear older neighborhoods with dilapidated, crowded housing. These neighborhoods, generally home to poorer Latino and African-American populations, were replaced by interstate highways, civic institutions, stadiums, and middle class housing projects. While these projects succeeded at removing and replacing dilapidated structures, they were also costly and destructive, displacing thousands of disadvantaged residents without providing adequate public housing in compensation.[12] Moreover, these projects often failed to bring long-term stability or vibrancy to the neighborhoods they replaced. Unless urban renewal developments were built adjacent to stable neighborhoods or other strong institutions, the projects themselves often succumbed to blight.[13] In the end, then, urban renewal neither eliminated blight from the city nor sparked further redevelopment, causing more grief than real revitalization.

Model Cities, the Great Society program that replaced urban renewal in 1966, promised a more comprehensive and community-driven approach to neighborhood revitalization. Yet it, too, proved unsuccessful. Initially, backers hoped the Model Cities program would focus on just a handful of cities, infusing hundreds of millions of dollars

in each to test the idea that a coordinated, comprehensive approach could succeed where the heavy-handed approach of urban renewal had failed. To gain Congressional support, however, the program had to be expanded to include 150 cities, diluting the impact the program could have in any one area. Furthermore, once it was implemented, the new Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) proved unable to coordinate other federal agencies effectively, undermining the effort to address community needs comprehensively. The one area where Model Cities proved successful was involving the community in the decision-making process. However, the residents were largely unable to realize their visions of community improvement. Funding was insufficient, federal leadership was lacking, and the program was short-lived.[14]

Model Cities was succeeded by the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act, which consolidated several separate HUD initiatives into one program. The new law represented a major change in federal urban policy. Far more cities were eligible for the same pot of funding, including many smaller cities and growing areas in the West and Southwest that had previously been ineligible. Furthermore, local politicians, rather than residents groups, would once again control spending, and impoverished areas of major cities were no longer the singular focus. The new community development block grants (CDBG) could be spent in any lower or middle-income neighborhood. The greater flexibility of CDBG funding meant that cities could, in theory, focus comprehensive resources on targeted areas, but political pressures made the wide dispersal of funds far more likely. It therefore became essential to create private-public partnerships. There simply was not enough funding to rehabilitate any one distressed neighborhood using public funds alone; the private sector had to be involved.[15]

The shift in federal policy from urban renewal to community development led some planners to call for the use of triage to prioritize spending.[16] The term refers to the treatment of the wounded in wartime or disaster.[17] Ordinarily, hospitals treat those in greatest need first. If a patient is near death, a doctor will see to him immediately, regardless of whether any treatment is likely to revive him. In extreme emergencies, however, doctors are forced to ration care. When there are too many victims to treat and not enough supplies, doctors are forced to make split-second decisions on whether a patient fits into one of three categories: those whose wounds do not require immediate care to ensure survival; those who will likely survive but only if emergency care is provided; and those for whom no available care will likely be of help. Instead of treating the last group first, doctors give priority to those in the second class, the deeply wounded but curable, in order to save the most lives possible.

In 1975, Anthony Downs, a scholar of public policy and administration, became the first of many to declare triage an apt metaphor for the urban crisis. Given sufficient resources, Downs argued, cities would not only address every instance of neighborhood decline, they would give the greatest attention to those areas where the symptoms were gravest. But given the scale of decline throughout major cities and the scarcity of resources (due both to the lack of federal support and the recessionary economy), cities could not tackle all neighborhoods at once. They could only focus resources in targeted areas. That being so, Downs believed the logic of triage must apply. If every neighborhood could not be saved with the resources at hand, a city could at least seek to maximize the impact of redevelopment, which required focusing resources on the most

"savable" neighborhoods rather than on those with the greatest need, which were considered already beyond hope.

Doing so would require categorizing the health of neighborhoods just as doctors categorized the health of the wounded. To determine whether a neighborhood was healthy, ill, or terminal, Downs developed a classification system based on indicators of neighborhood decline. These included five separate but parallel processes that allegedly caused neighborhoods to decline from stable, middle-class areas to impoverished, semi-abandoned areas: decreasing socioeconomic status; ethnic change from white to black or Latino occupancy; physical deterioration and decay of housing and infrastructure; increased pessimism about the area's future among residents, investors, and public officials; and economic disinvestment, leading to tax foreclosure and abandonment.[18]

The factors Downs identified reflected the conventional wisdom among many real estate officials that neighborhoods experienced natural and sequential decline through a series of life stages. Initially, healthy neighborhoods were well maintained, middle or upper class, and predominately white. As they declined, they became less well maintained, lower income, and home to people of color. These characteristics were considered causes of decline, not symptoms. In Downs' words: "Certainly not all ethnic change leads to neighborhood decline. But it is a fact that nearly all neighborhoods that have experienced the greatest decline have previously gone through some ethnic change."[19] His assertion echoed the self-fulfilling logic of redlining, which denied loans to neighborhoods where people of color lived, ensuring further neighborhood decline by preventing community investment.[20]

Yet Downs believed these factors could be used to tailor redevelopment strategies for particular neighborhood types. In areas with moderate decline, for example, code enforcement could be an effective tool to prevent further decline. Pressuring property owners to do maintenance would help keep up the character of the neighborhood and ensure further investment. But in areas with severe blight and vacancy, where owning property was only marginally profitable, strict code enforcement might only accelerate decline by encouraging owners to simply abandon their properties. In these highly blighted areas, Downs believed, redevelopment would have to be preceded by partial or total clearance of blight through demolition. Even then redevelopment would only succeed if the blighted area were adjacent to a more stable neighborhood, making "slum clearance" a costly and risky proposition.[21]

Instead, Downs favored spending most community development funding on areas with only moderate decline, where a minor infusion of resources might lead to significant improvement. Yet realizing that politicians would be under pressure to spend CDBG funds everywhere, Downs developed spending recommendations for three neighborhood types: healthy, deteriorated, and in-between. Healthy neighborhoods would receive the least CDBG funding; only low-cost, high-visibility projects (like planting trees and providing new street furniture) would be approved if politically necessary. In very deteriorated areas, cities would focus solely on demolition and the provision of social welfare. Cities would not seek to physically redevelop these areas; in fact, they would "accelerate their abandonment, while still providing all requisite public services to those who remain there, and helping many increase their incomes and status through input benefits." Major redevelopment efforts would be focused exclusively on in-between

areas, where public spending could not only reduce blight but also induce further investment from the private sector, thereby maximizing the value of the public's investment.[22]

William C. Baer, writing in the Public Interest, concurred with Downs's theory but took it further. Like Downs, Baer believed that urban neighborhoods passed through discernible life stages over time, but he concluded that the ultimate, inevitable, natural, and final stage through which all neighborhoods would pass was death. Urban death, he wrote, was "very much in the natural order of things, to be taken in stride."[23] He observed, "There is a refusal to admit that older cities or neighborhoods can die: They may be 'sick' or 'deteriorating,' but the belief is nevertheless held by expert and politician alike that with proper treatment these areas will recover to survive forever."[24] But Baer disagreed. "Urban death—or at least neighborhood death—in the nation's cities is coming to pass. It may be hindered by expertise, detoured by cajolery, impeded by charismatic leadership, and delayed by simple faith; but it will come. It is an event inevitably linked to the preceding urban growth and development."[25] He concluded that "inefficient triage"—that is, de facto triage rather than de jure—was the most practical and salutary vehicle for achieving neighborhood euthanasia, the just and necessary end, he felt, to dying urban areas.[26]

Urban Triage

Downs's recommendations were controversial, and Baer's more so, but they were not without parallel. Planners in both Cleveland and St. Louis endorsed triage in the mid-1970s, but both proposals drew heavy criticism and neither was fully enacted.

In St. Louis, outrage erupted when a local newspaper revealed that a consulting firm working for the planning commission had recommended diverting resources from "depletion zones"—the city's poorest areas—to neighborhoods with less severe blight. In 1973, the city of St. Louis had hired a local consulting firm, Team Four Inc., to advise the Planning Commission on the implementation of a new citywide master plan then in development.[27] The firm produced a series of memorandums for the city on the best way to adopt, stage, budget, and implement the "Draft Comprehensive Plan" prepared by the city's planners. One of these memos, "Technical Memorandum 6B: City-Wide Implementation Strategies," recommended a rightsizing scheme similar to what Downs had proposed.[28]

The memo advocated assessing the viability of all city neighborhoods according to such criteria as the age and condition of properties, the presence of private investment, public service levels, and population stability. Based on these factors, every area of St. Louis could be labeled as a conservation, redevelopment, or depletion zone. Some of these zones might encompass a neighborhood; others only a few blocks. Conservation areas were the most well maintained and economically viable corridors of the city. They would serve as the foundation upon which a broader revitalization of the city would be built. Redevelopment areas were those areas of the city with the potential to reach the status of conservation areas but not without major public investment. The city would increase its investment in these areas to reinforce private investment and restore them to full economic vibrancy. Most controversially, "depletion" areas were defined as those areas where a "no growth" policy would be followed "until firm market and adequate public resources [were] available." In these areas, the memo recommended "instituting

as part of a new system of land development control, a growth and redevelopment strategy which linked capital improvement and service availability to redevelopment." In other words, developers had to pay for basic infrastructure themselves; the city would no longer underwrite development in half-populated areas. Instead they would pursue a policy of land banking to "assemble and hold properties" until they were "ripe" for redevelopment sometime in the future.[29]

In 1974, a year before the Interim Comprehensive Draft Plan was to be released, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch obtained a copy of "Technical Memorandum 6B" and other planning documents through a Freedom of Information Act request to HUD, which was funding the planning process. (Initially, the paper tried to get information about the planning process directly from City Hall, but the mayor refused to cooperate, lending the documents an air of secrecy.) The Post-Dispatch published excerpts from the memo alongside maps created by the newspaper that labeled the North Side, the predominately African-American area of St. Louis, as a potential zone for depletion.[30]

The report caused an immediate outcry in the community. According to Jerome S. Pratter, a lawyer for Team Four Inc., four misconceptions about the memo rapidly became pervasive: that the entire northwest corridor of St. Louis would be targeted for depletion; that the strategy memo endorsed the "benign neglect" of the black community; that the plan advocated the withdrawal of public services from depletion areas; and that strict code enforcement would be used to drive people from their homes. In other words, the public feared the return of urban renewal. Pratter insisted that this characterization of triage was unfounded. The memo did not identify specific sites for depletion; race would not be an explicit factor in the determination of depletion areas (in contrast to the

classification system that Downs endorsed); basic services would still be provided even if major capital projects would no longer be supported; and the plan specifically warned against using code enforcement to evict poor residents. Nevertheless, the public perceived the "Team Four Plan" as racially motivated and geographically biased.[31]

In fact, the "Team Four Plan" remains politically toxic today. Many people still believe that the proposal's recommendations were adopted as de facto policy by subsequent administrations, in part, no doubt, due to Pratter's assertion in 1977 that the "memo's basic policies have proven to be ones that have been advocated under different names not only in numerous other cities but also in the city of St. Louis as well."[32] As recently as 2008, the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity of the U.S. House Committee on Financial Services held hearings in St. Louis, led by Chairwoman U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA), to air grievances about the Team Four plan and discuss future redevelopment of the North Side.[33] Afterward, William Albinson, a current principal of Team Four, felt compelled to defend his firm's reputation in an op-ed published in the St. Louis American, which historically serves the black community.[34] It is doubtful whether any St. Louis politician would dare endorse a similar plan today.

The endorsement of triage in Cleveland generated less attention and less ire. In 1975, the Planning Commission issued the "Cleveland Planning Policy Report," a forthright and progressive assessment of the city's planning needs that anticipated both ongoing population loss and declining municipal resources. Bounded by these two constraints, the planners issued a series of recommendations nevertheless intended to promote "a wider range of choices for those Cleveland residents who have few, if any, choices."[35] Foremost among these were policies intended to strengthen middle-class

areas on the verge of decline while simultaneously making them more accessible to the poor.

The report's primary recommendation was to provide a federal housing subsidy to low-income residents to enable them to acquire higher quality housing in Cleveland's better neighborhoods. Underlying this policy was a series of secondary recommendations that fell within the rubric of triage. First, neighborhoods on the verge of decline would be given higher priority than neighborhoods with severe blight for community development funding. Second, the city would cease new construction of low-income housing in favor of rehabilitating the existing housing stock and subsidizing poorer residents to inhabit it. Third, as blighted areas continued to lose population (now abetted by housing subsidies encouraging relocation to middle-class neighborhoods), the city would move aggressively to demolish homes as they were abandoned. The net effect, if fully enacted, would have been to clear out the city's most blighted neighborhoods and integrate the residents into middle-class areas throughout greater Cleveland.[36]

Yet the report's most controversial element proved to be its citywide preference for neighborhood redevelopment over the development of downtown. The planners opposed subsidizing any major development in the central business district that did not give jobs to unemployed Cleveland workers or add to the tax rolls. Funding was scarce, and they felt it would go the furthest if spent in the neighborhoods. So when a new office tower requiring public subsidy was proposed for Cleveland's downtown, the Planning Commission came out against it. Yet it proved an unpopular position. Business and political leaders roundly criticized the commission's decision, and the City Council ultimately overruled it.[37] The reaction to the report in Cleveland, then, was nearly the

opposite of the reaction in St. Louis. Where the planners in St. Louis were vilified for ignoring the rights of the poor, the planners in Cleveland were vilified for favoring the downtrodden at the expense of visible progress downtown. Either way, triage proved difficult to implement.

Planned Shrinkage

The following year, a New York City official took the concept of triage a step further when he famously embraced what planners in St. Louis and Cleveland had so vehemently avoided: actively evicting residents from severely blighted neighborhoods. In an announcement that made national news, Roger Starr, chief housing administrator under Mayor Abraham Beame, proposed the "planned shrinkage" of the South Bronx and the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.[38] Along with Robert Moses, New York's legendary planning figure and political powerhouse, who had called the South Bronx "beyond rebuilding, tinkering and restoring" back in 1973, Starr called for completely closing down both areas, which were reeling from rapid abandonment and arson as New York City suffered through the worst financial crisis in its history.[39]

Given the severity of New York's budget crisis by 1976, and the seeming hopelessness of any effort to revive the South Bronx or Brownsville, Starr thought the city should immediately cease all efforts to rehabilitate either area. Instead, he proposed intentionally accelerating the decline of both by discouraging investment and offering incentives to the remaining residents to relocate to other neighborhoods. Doing so would enable the government to cut off services to the vacated areas, realizing a cost savings, and let the land sit idle, perhaps for decades, until economic conditions improved

sufficiently to justify their redevelopment. At the same time, Starr hoped the "planned shrinkage" of the South Bronx and Brownsville would directly benefit other areas of the city by sparing them service cutbacks (all the cuts would be concentrated in shrinkage areas) and by adding to their density by relocating displaced residents.[40]

Starr's remarks on planned shrinkage, first before a real estate gathering on January 14 and soon afterward in the pages of the New York Times, produced an immediate outcry, starting with the mayor's office. First Deputy Mayor John E. Zuccotti, speaking for the Beame administration, called the plan "impractical" and one "we are not pursuing."[41] At a public hearing before the Board of Estimate, Ronald Shiffman, director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, testified that, "Until Administrator Starr, proponent of the genocidal program of shrinkage, is removed from office, the city will be unable to make any progress with these problems."[42] In an editorial published February 11, Gordon J. Davis, a commissioner on the New York City Planning Commission, called the proposal a "throwback to discredited slum-clearance policies first sponsored by the Federal Government in 1949" and wrote that "the economic and racial discrimination inherent in any plan of affirmative neglect of poor communities is clearly inconsistent with New York City's minimal responsibilities under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution."[43] The black and Puerto Rican caucus of the City Council adopted a resolution of condemnation against planned shrinkage and picketers tried to prevent Starr from attending the Regional Plan Association meetings held at the New York Hilton.[44] Within a year, Starr did in fact resign his position, although he denied that protests were a factor.[45]

Starr later explained the rationale behind his failed proposal in an oft-cited New York Times Magazine cover story that echoes some of the arguments made earlier by Anthony Downs. Most observers, he contended, saw two ways to address New York's financial crisis: increase economic development or seek an influx of federal assistance. Starr contended that neither would fix the city's deficit. The decline of manufacturing in New York was not temporary but permanent, and so too then would be the population loss the city had sustained. Nor was the federal government likely to compensate for these macroeconomic changes; both the will and the means to do so were lacking. The only solution then would be to rightsize New York for a smaller population, condensing the city into fewer neighborhoods to ensure that every remaining block had sufficient density to remain viable and vibrant. "If the city is to survive with a smaller population," he wrote, "the population must be encouraged to concentrate itself in the sections that remain alive." Yet he acknowledged his proposal was extraordinarily unpopular.[46]

After the defeat of Starr's proposal, further discussion of planned shrinkage was largely confined to academia. Public officials in other cities were loath to discuss such a controversial topic, especially as the economic crisis of the 1970s abated and Washington became less supportive of aid to declining cities. Yet a few academics carried Starr's argument forward. In 1979, the economist James Heilbrun proposed a three-part program to achieve neighborhood consolidation: the federal government would finance housing allowances to enable displaced residents to relocate within the city to redevelopment areas; the city would compensate displaced residents and property owners with revenue from a special tax on redevelopment areas meant to capture the increase in value from the influx of residents and capital; and a new local public body would be created to plan and

run the program.[47] Susan Hedges Patton, then a law clerk on the Sixth Circuit of the United States Court of Appeals, proposed an alternative plan in 1981 in the *Buffalo Law Review* that would use land banking to obtain properties in vacated areas and hold them until redevelopment was both prudent and profitable.[48] Neither model gained much traction beyond academia.

Not until 1993 would another proposal of planned shrinkage emerge, this time in Detroit. On April 26, 1993, Marie Farrell-Donaldson, the city ombudsman, startled the Detroit City Council at a budget hearing when she proposed a radical solution to Detroit's chronic budget woes—clearing out and fencing off the city's least populous areas in order to permanently reduce the city's service obligations. By that time, the city's population had fallen nearly in half since its 1950s peak. As a consequence, much city land lay vacant without any prospect of redevelopment. So just as the auto companies temporarily "mothballed" redundant factories during recessions, Detroit, she thought, could "mothball" its most abandoned neighborhoods, letting them sit idle indefinitely until such time as they could be profitably redeveloped. In the meantime, the city "would just let the weeds grow," she was quoted, "just like in the forest." Meanwhile, the city's vast municipally owned housing stock, acquired through tax foreclosure, would be made available to displaced residents at no cost.[49]

As in other cities, the response to the unexpected proposal was generally cold. When asked for a comment, Mayor Coleman A. Young's spokesperson, Robert Berg, responded dryly, "I suspect that the mayor would rather redevelop areas of the city."[50] Others were more direct in their criticism. City officials were quoted as calling the plan "bizarre" and "crazy." Anecdotally, however, the Free Press reported that some residents

were warming to the idea, including some of those who might be displaced from the city's least populated neighborhoods.[51] Without the backing of the mayor, however, the proposal went nowhere, and planned shrinkage once again faded from the national conversation amidst the economic boom of the Clinton years and the redevelopment of central business districts in cities across the United States.

Proponents of triage and planned shrinkage offered a series of justifications for rightsizing that still ring true today. The decline of manufacturing in the United States has proven to be terminal, and cities without diversified economies have continued to lose jobs and population. Furthermore, the resources to confront vacancy, abandonment, and associated social ills are more constrained than ever. Proponents of triage warned that if cities spread limited community development funding across too many neighborhoods, no area would witness substantial progress. This has held true in Detroit, and in recent years both the city government and major philanthropies have come to favor a more targeted approach to redevelopment. Planned shrinkage advocates also warned that without sufficient density, city neighborhoods would become increasingly costly to service, and this too has held true in Detroit and elsewhere.

Yet both the more modest triage proposals and the more extreme calls for planned shrinkage had serious flaws that contributed to their rejection. First, the proposals were developed without public consultation. The "Team Four Plan" in St. Louis was crafted in secret by an independent contractor and first introduced to the public by the St. Louis-Dispatch after a Freedom of Information Act request. Planned shrinkage in New York and mothballing in Detroit were similarly crafted by lone officials and presented to the

public indirectly through local newspapers. This was in part a tactical error. Residents felt blindsided by what they read in the papers. Reports of upheaval and eminent domain brought to mind the worst memories of urban renewal, when whole neighborhoods were cleared at a devastating cost to communities of color. More seriously, it was a moral error. The residents themselves deserved a say in the future of their neighborhoods. In a democracy, major neighborhood changes should never be planned without input from the residents directly affected. Even in the early planning stages, when policies are not yet fully formed, the residents deserve to be informed of the plans under discussion so they can come to terms with the issues.

Second, the proposals lacked institutional support. In St. Louis, the call for triage came from a consulting firm, not the Planning Commission itself, and the mayor tried to distance himself from it once it was revealed in the papers. In New York and Detroit, lone officials proposed planned shrinkage in the papers first without first securing any support, either in the community or within the mayoral administrations they worked in. Not surprisingly, the mayors of both cities immediately distanced themselves from the controversial proposals. Only in Cleveland did the call for triage come directly from the appointed Planning Commission, but the commission nevertheless found itself in conflict with the mayor and the City Council over the application of its report.

Finally, the proposals embodied an incomplete and pessimistic vision of the future. While unusually honest about the permanence of industrial decline and unusually blunt about the financial difficulties facing cities, the proponents of triage and planned shrinkage failed to conceptualize a logically complete solution to the cities' land use problems. They advocated consolidating neighborhoods without a plan for stewarding

the land left behind. In the first New York Times article on planned shrinkage, Roger Starr was quoted as saying that the South Bronx could one day be converted to a national park after it was cleared of people and buildings. Similarly, Marie Farrell-Donaldson suggested Detroit would fence off vacated land and "let the weeds grow." Statements like these were neither tactful nor inspiring. Downs, the earliest public advocate of triage, also defended leaving parcels of land in urban redevelopment projects vacant indefinitely. "Just the removal of original blight may already be providing society with sufficient benefits to justify the cost of clearance, " he wrote, "even if no redevelopment ever occurs."[52] It didn't matter that poor residents were displaced in the process. Vacating land was seen as a benefit in and of itself, without specifying what the idle land might be used for, who would take responsibility for its upkeep, or whether residents would want to live adjacent to large, empty fields still rich with the memory of homes and shops that had been lost to the wrecking ball. The economic logic of shrinkage was made clear, but the appeal of the resulting smaller city was not.

III. Youngstown 2010

If the original proponents of triage and urban planning made the case for why repurposing shrinking cities was necessary, leaders of Youngstown, Ohio, demonstrated how to build support for such a proposal and begin to act on it. In 2003, Youngstown became the first American city to openly embrace shrinking to a smaller size when it adopted the "Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan," an innovative new proposal intended to "rationalize and consolidate" the city's infrastructure. Combining triage policies with a new rhetoric of sustainability, the plan calls for the consolidation and greening of a city whose future once looked bleak. While its physical impact has thus far been limited, "Youngstown 2010" contains specific examples of triage planning that Detroit could replicate and is notable for the successful public outreach and education campaign that preceded the plan's adoption.

The narrative arc of Youngstown's history is much like Detroit's. Although never of equal size—Youngstown today has only one-fourth the land area of Detroit and only one-tenth the population—Youngstown experienced a similar boom and bust. Propelled by the growing steel industry, the city's population increased five-fold between 1900 and 1930, reaching a peak of 170,000. Thirty years later, the population level remained nearly the same; it was an era of extended prosperity but not of growth, as Youngstown became more dependent than ever on steel and other heavy industry. By the 1960s, the city's fortunes were reversing. Middle-class households took flight for the suburbs and the steel industry began to falter. The darkest day in Youngstown's history came on September 19, 1977—known locally as "Black Monday"—when the city's largest employer, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, abruptly shut its doors, laying off more than

4,000 workers overnight. The dispirited city continued to lose jobs and people in the following years, shrinking to a low of just 82,026 people in 2000.[1]

Population loss rendered much of the city's housing stock and infrastructure redundant. The master plan likens Youngstown to a "size 40 man wearing a size 60 suit."[2] The effects are especially manifest in the east and south quadrants of the city. The east side has the most vacancies of any area in Youngstown. Unlike Detroit, however, the area is not vacant from abandonment but rather from a lack of development. The city anticipated ongoing growth that never came. Roads, sewers, and electric lines were laid, but most of the lots were never developed, leaving an unfinished neighborhood that is semi-rural in character.[3] The south side of Youngstown is more comparable to Detroit. The neighborhoods there were the first in Youngstown to be developed specifically to house industrial workers, and for decades they were dense and middle-class, with a total population in 1960 of 67,846. But forty years later, the population there had fallen to 32,249, less than half the area's peak. Now many of the storefronts along the main commercial strip are vacant, and thousands of homes have been abandoned.[4]

Frustrated with failed efforts to spark new growth in these declining areas, leaders of Youngstown decided in the early 2000s to rewrite the city's outdated master plan to acknowledge the new economic and demographic reality of Youngstown: that the city had shrunk and wouldn't grow again in the foreseeable future. The existing master plan denied that anything had changed. First enacted in the 1950s and later revised in 1974, it reflected the wishful thinking of an earlier era. It anticipated growth, not decline, and allotted land accordingly, designating far more land for residential and commercial uses

than needed for the city's smaller population. It also retained extensive zoning for heavy industrial uses on the expectation that Youngstown would attract new industry to replace the old. But decades of business retention and attraction campaigns failed to halt the transformation of Youngstown's economy. By the 2000s, the city's largest employer wasn't a steel mill, it was Youngstown State University (YSU), and untold parcels of land in Youngstown were either vacant or being used for purposes that did not comply with the obsolete zoning designated by the old master plan.[5]

Unlike in other cities, the push to rightsize Youngstown had broad backing from the beginning, not only in City Hall but also at YSU. Although the initial push for a new master plan came from the City Council (which had been inspired at a conference by a presentation on the reinvention of Chattanooga, Tennessee), leaders at YSU quickly endorsed the effort.[6] The university had recently begun revising its own facilities master plan and was eager to merge its efforts with that of the city. The two, after all, would rise and fall together. YSU anchored the north end of town and brought students and jobs to the city each year. But if Youngstown's decline continued, the university would become less desirable and enrollment would drop, hurting city and university alike. With that understanding, the two pledged to work together, with planning staff from YSU working alongside staff members for the city.[7]

The two-part planning process they pioneered was markedly different from previous triage proposals. Conscious of the need to build public support for the controversial proposal, they hired a Toronto-based firm to design the planning process as a community engagement and civic education initiative. The intent was to win the trust and input of the community while at the same time shaping the contour of the

conversation. The city's leaders set the framework—Youngstown was shrinking, and something had to be done to address it—but from the earliest stages they created space for residents to shape the solution and become invested in the new master plan's success.[8]

The first stage of planning was a visioning process. It kicked off in 2002 with a marketing campaign. Billboards and newspaper ads exhorted residents to visit the web site Youngstown2010.com and attend one of the twelve visioning workshops that would be held over a seven-month period. Local leaders were invited to attend these meetings to do a "SWOT" analysis, assessing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to their neighborhoods. From these meetings, four themes emerged to guide the new master plan: accepting that Youngstown is now a smaller city than it once was; defining a new, more diverse role for Youngstown in the regional economy; improving the city's image and quality of life; and continuing the momentum generated in phase one of the planning process with a detailed action plan and continual trumpeting of the city's successes. These four themes were presented to the public at a final mass meeting held December 16, 2002. Over 1,400 people attended, and the local PBS affiliate broadcast the event on television. The meeting was considered a great success. The public was broadly optimistic about Youngstown's new direction, and nearly one hundred people volunteered to join one of several subcommittees to help see the plan to fruition.[9]

Once the vision was adopted, phase two of planning began. The first step was conducting a survey of all the city's residential parcels. Canvassers walked every block of Youngstown to see whether parcels were vacant or had structures on them, and if they had structures, whether they were occupied and what condition they were in. Then the data was compiled and mapped, creating, for the first time, a comprehensive portrait of

the changes Youngstown had undergone since the 1960s. In the summer and fall of 2004, a second round of community meetings were held to present the results of the parcel survey to the public alongside census information on each section of the city. Participants were invited to share their own perspective on how their neighborhoods had changed and what the "Youngstown 2010" plan could do to make their neighborhoods better. More than eight hundred people contributed their ideas. Using this input, city planners prepared a final draft of the land use plan that fall. On January 27, 2005, two years after the planning process had begun, the "Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan" was presented to an enthusiastic crowd of 1,300 residents, and City Council adopted the plan soon after.[10]

"Youngstown 2010" calls for a series of major changes along the lines of triage. First, the plan significantly reduces the quantity of land zoned residential and commercial (the former by thirty percent and the latter by sixteen percent) to reflect the fact that there are fewer people living in Youngstown. Second, the plan calls for an aggressive program of demolition to rid the city of nearly all of its thousands of derelict structures. Third, the plan identifies transition areas, like the Idora neighborhood south of downtown, where the city will focus its redevelopment offers, including aggressive code enforcement and targeted demolition to rid the areas of blight. Fourth, echoing language used by triage proponents in the 1970s, the plan also explicitly identifies neighborhoods (sections of Oak Hill, Warren, East Side and Brier Hill) that it deems "beyond any hope of short-term solutions and require comprehensive reinvestment strategies." In these neighborhoods, Youngstown no longer permits the construction of subsidized low-income housing, nor

are residents eligible for home rehabilitation funding. Instead, they are offered an equal sum as an incentive to relocate to a denser area within the city.[11]

In contrast to previous proposals for triage planning, however, "Youngtown 2010" couples downsizing with efforts to make Youngstown more environmentally sustainable. The most notable change in the master plan is the creation of a new zoning classification: industrial green. The plan shifts 3,300 acres of land formerly zoned light industrial, heavy industrial, or commercial into this category. While not strictly defined, industrial green land is intended for "non-polluting environmentally friendly industries" that include "preservation and rehabilitation of open space as part of the overall site design." On the east side of the city, the plan calls for the restoration of wetlands in a sparsely populated area that was platted but never fully developed. Doing so would both limit the opportunity for further sprawl in Youngstown and earn money for the city. When developers in Mahoning County wish to build on wetlands, they must offset the loss by purchasing mitigation rights to wetlands elsewhere in the county. Because the county has few wetlands remaining, creating a wetlands mitigation bank in Youngstown should prove profitable for the city because it can easily sell the rights to developers. "Youngstown 2010" also provides for the creation of an expanded network of green spaces throughout the city (both parks and nature areas) that will be linked together by greenways, tree-lined paths that are friendly to cyclists and walkers. Lastly, it creates an agricultural zoning classification. This is primarily meant to legalize long-standing farms on the city's rural, eastern edge, but city officials are also open to the idea of small-scale urban farming within depopulated neighborhoods (like Detroit has witnessed in recent

years). So far, however, no land within core neighborhoods has been officially designated for that use.[12]

Overall, the Youngstown 2010 plan takes a fairly slow, passive approach to land banking and the reconfiguration of the city grid. The most visible effect of rightsizing so far has been the mass demolition of abandoned homes. Some restrictions have also been placed on the city's least populated areas: the city will not subsidize new low-income housing and it will not fund home repair, offering an incentive to move to a denser area of Youngstown instead. But no one is being forced to move, and so far all four offers of relocation assistance have been rejected. This is not the "planned shrinkage" advocated by Roger Starr in New York or Marie Farrel-Donaldson in Detroit. Eminent domain is not on the table, and the city's basic street grid will not be altered (except, perhaps, on the far east side, where some streets might one day be restored to wetlands). Instead, leaders in Youngstown are taking a patient approach to land acquisition, both because the resources for implementing "Youngstown 2010" are quite limited and because residents prefer a less disruptive, long-term approach to land use change.[13]

"Youngstown 2010" is also notable for the degree to which it has fostered leaders and institutions committed to seeing its vision realized. Jay Williams, the director of community development during the planning of "Youngstown 2010," was elected mayor in 2005, becoming the first African-American and the youngest person to hold that office. He has since been re-elected, running both times on a pledge to implement "Youngstown 2010."[14] The passage of the master plan also jumpstarted Youngstown's non-profit community development sector. Unlike larger cities like Cleveland and Detroit, the city had never had non-profit community development organizations working independently

from city government. That changed with "Youngstown 2010." Two new organizations formed: the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative and the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation. These groups are credited with generating momentum for the restructuring of the city as well as defending the interests of residents as the master plan begins to be implemented.[15]

Finally, as a consequence of "Youngstown 2010," the city has markedly improved its image, not just among locals but also nationally. In the early 2000s, Youngstown was widely perceived as a failed steel town with little hope of restoring its economic might or population. Now the rhetoric has changed. Youngstown is no longer trying to be a major factory town or restore its population to its 1960s peak. Instead it is recasting itself as a bedroom community of Cleveland and Pittsburgh with a growing state university, a fledgling entrepreneurial sector, and a commitment to sustainability—and it is being judged on the promise of these future plans, not on its past. The new master plan has drawn accolades and attention from dozens of media outlets and policymakers around the country, including the New York Times and Entrepreneur Magazine, which called Youngstown one of the ten best places to start a business. While these positive stories alone cannot lower the unemployment rate or improve quality of life, they have given heart to local boosters and made realizing the goals laid out in "Youngstown 2010" more feasible by improving the political environment and drawing the interest of outside investors.[16]

IV. Toward Rightsizing Detroit

Five years after the passage of "Youngstown 2010," similar policy changes are being considered in Detroit. The fiscal and human strain of the ongoing recession and foreclosure crisis has pushed politicians and pundits alike to embrace "shrinking" or "consolidating" the city in some respect, and Mayor Bing has warned that there will be "winners and losers" in the process.[1] So far, however, the administration has released few details. In his first "State of the City" address, Bing announced plans to demolish 3,000 abandoned homes using funds from the Neighborhood Stabilization Program. He also assured the audience that any pending plans to reconfigure the city "will involve direct participation from our community." But he has not yet outlined when the planning process will begin, how it will be conducted, or what influence residents will have on the outcome.[2]

Despite the uncertainty around Bing's intentions, three recently released reports are pushing the conversation forward in constructive ways. The first is a comprehensive survey of residential properties in Detroit, which, for the first time, has quantified precisely how many vacant lots and abandoned buildings plague the city and where they are most concentrated. The second is the "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan," which uses the logic of rightsizing to envision a new future for one struggling neighborhood on the city's far west side. The third is a report issued by the Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD) that recommends specific and creative ways to improve every corner of Detroit depending on the current use and condition of the land. Together, these three reports demonstrate both the challenges and opportunities that rightsizing presents. They also highlight some of the key ethical and political questions that need to

be addressed before the public can fully assess whether rightsizing the city is more likely to benefit or harm the average resident.

Detroit Residential Parcel Survey

The release of the "Detroit Residential Parcel Survey" in February 2010 has already brought new clarity to the discussion of rightsizing. The data was collected in the fall of 2009 by three-person canvassing teams organized by the Ginsberg Center at the University of Michigan. These teams drove through every block of Detroit, visually assessing the condition of each residential parcel without exiting their vehicles. The data they collected was compiled and mapped by Data Driven Detroit, a non-profit funded by the Skillman Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, and then released to the public.[3]

In some ways, the results were encouraging. The canvassers found that 218,000 properties in Detroit, or 95 percent of the city's housing stock, were in good condition or in need of only minor repairs. But canvassers also found that 91,000 lots were vacant. A third of these had some sign of improvement, like fencing or a garden, but most were untended. The canvassers also recorded more than 30,000 vacant structures. A third of these were open to trespass or otherwise judged to be in dangerous condition.[4]

Most of these abandoned properties were concentrated in a broad middle swath of the city, not along the edges. That fact has helped to dispel one prevalent myth about rightsizing—that the city could save money by simply de-annexing the neighborhoods along its suburban borders, effectively shrinking the city's size. In fact, with a few notable exceptions, the neighborhoods near the city's edges tend to have higher household incomes and better quality housing stock than the older neighborhoods built

closer to the city's historic urban core. So spinning off these neighborhoods, even if it were possible, would be fiscally irresponsible and has never been under consideration. Rightsizing will not and cannot involve literally shrinking the city. Instead, if Youngstown is any guide, rightsizing is more likely to involve a series of changes to reconfigure land use within the city limits, from reducing the proportion of land reserved for residential and commercial use to modifying the street grid. These changes could be carried out on a macro scale, encouraging migration from the middle of the city to the edge, or on a micro scale, encouraging consolidation within specific neighborhoods.

The Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan

The "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan" demonstrates how the neighborhood-by-neighborhood approach to rightsizing might work. It explains in detail how to rightsize one low-income neighborhood on Detroit's far west side that has been devastated by population loss and deepening poverty since the 1980s. Much of the area's poorly built housing stock has been lost to abandonment and arson, and vacant lots are consistently used as illegal dumping sites despite the vigilant efforts of volunteer clean up crews. The new land use plan, which was funded by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and released on July 21, 2009, anticipates no further growth. Instead it tries to build on the model of "Youngstown 2010," calling for the reconfiguration of Brightmoor to make the most of the assets that remain. Its recommendations include removing small streets to create larger blocks, relocating residents from a one square mile area to make room for a "new economy business park," and introducing entrepreneurial homesteading to generate jobs and use more land productively.

The plan defines Brightmoor as a roughly four square mile area bordered by Grand River Avenue to the north, Evergreen Road to the east, Schoolcraft Street to the south, and Telegraph Road to the west. The River Rouge winds along the western edge of the neighborhood, up through the spacious Eliza Howell Park and then north parallel to Telegraph. Adjacent to the park is a small subdivision filled with modest red brick homes with white trim. But most of Brightmoor's housing stock is noticeably older, smaller, and less well built. The area was developed in the 1920s as an affordable option for Southern immigrants looking for jobs at the Ford Motor Company. The homes were simple prefabs set close together on thirty-foot wide lots. Most were just 400-600 square feet, had only one bedroom, and lacked indoor plumbing. The expectation was that these homes would be temporary. With good paying auto work, homeowners hoped to build additions to these homes or knock them down and start anew.[5]

Looking back, community leaders have lamented that Brightmoor was designed to fail. The homeowners' dreams of developing their neighborhood were never realized. The hastily built prefab homes proved costly to repair, and a series of economic setbacks, starting with the Great Depression, limited total investment in the neighborhood. By the beginning of the 1980s, when Brightmoor's population began to fall, most of the homes were in poor condition. Seemingly every week another house was abandoned, burned down, or had trash illegally dumped on its lawn. Today, despite years of effort by community groups to tear down dangerous homes, more than 1,500 abandoned properties remain that require demolition, and one hundred more homes go abandoned each year.[6]

This is the context in which the "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan" tries to craft a positive future for the area. Despite anticipating no future population growth or housing

demand, the plan seeks to stabilize the neighborhood by reconfiguring it. It does so by subdividing the neighborhood into four areas—stabilization, redevelopment, opportunity, and commercial—and developing different action plans to revive each type.

The stabilization zone includes Eliza Howell Park, the subdivision of brick homes that adjoins it, and the blocks closest to Brightmoor's borders. The report insists that "the first priority" of any community investment in the area be "the support, preservation and improvement of these intact quality neighborhoods."[7] To ward against the spread of blight, it calls for the demolition of any derelict structure within 120 days. The report also aims to put as much publicly owned land into private hands as possible, both to ensure that the lots are maintained and to generate tax revenue. Two recommendations accomplish this goal. First, when a single, publicly owned parcel of land lies between two houses, the city will deed half the parcel to each homeowner on the condition that they incorporate the land into their properties using fencing, bushes, or some other visible improvement. Second, when two publicly owned parcels of land are adjacent to each other, the city will merge the parcels together into one lot and build infill housing on it. The report warns, however, that because net housing demand in Brightmoor is effectively zero (if not negative), one house will have to be demolished in the opportunity zone for every house built in the stabilization zone.[8]

The report envisions two possible futures for Eliza Howell Park. The park is one of Detroit's largest, but it is not well kept. The city's Parks and Recreation Department has foregone maintenance due to budget cuts, letting the play equipment rust and the grass grow wild in the summer. To make the park an asset to the community rather than a potential threat, the report calls for creating a large recreation center there that can draw

visitors from throughout the region. The renovated park would be operated by a private-public partnership and could feature such amenities as a splash park, athletic fields, and horse riding trails. Alternatively, the report endorses the park's partial development. A representative of the Howell family, which originally deeded the park to the city of Detroit, has sued the city for control. He argues that the city's failure to maintain the park invalidates the deed. He intends to develop the portion of the park that abuts Telegraph Road as a shopping center, leaving the remainder of the park open to the public.[9] If this route is taken, the report calls for tax increment financing to generate revenue to maintain the portion of the park left undeveloped.[10]

The remainder of Brightmoor's residential land is either slated for redevelopment or will be repurposed as an "opportunity" zone. The four areas chosen for redevelopment will be reconfigured to house all of the residents displaced from the opportunity zone in addition to the residents currently living there. Blighted structures will be removed, vacant lots will be consolidated, and infill housing will be built. The street grid, however, will not remain the same.[11]

Currently, Brightmoor has many short blocks subdivided into thirty-foot wide parcels. The report calls for consolidating these into "city blocks," "garden blocks," and "country blocks." City blocks would remain the same size as existing blocks but have fewer parcels; two or three existing parcels would be merged together to form 40 or 60-foot wide lots on the new street. Garden and country blocks would be both longer and wider than existing blocks and feature larger lot sizes. Four of the existing, short blocks would be merged together (including the streets that currently run through them) to form one super block. These super blocks would feature lots as wide as 150 feet if configured

as garden blocks. As country blocks, the lots would be one acre or more.[12] These large, open lots would be suitable for "urban homesteading." In this scenario, residents would both live and work on the land, operating small farms, nurseries, riding stables, or other agricultural and entrepreneurial ventures. The idea is modeled after the Homestead Act of 1862, which encouraged the settlement of the West. In a similar vein, the "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan" encourages urban homesteading to resettle vacant land.[13]

The 416-acre residential section of Brightmoor not designated for redevelopment would be repurposed as an "opportunity zone," the euphemism the report uses to refer to a business park (either offices or industrial). Although many blocks in this area are only half-occupied, hundreds of residents remain who would have to relocate to create space for the new businesses. Rather than use eminent domain to force people from their homes, the plan favors a voluntary housing swap facilitated by a local community development organization. Current residents of the opportunity zone would be offered infill housing or tax-foreclosed homes in the redevelopment area. If they accepted, their previous home would be demolished and the land would be banked for future development. This "patient buyer" approach would slowly empty the area over a period of years, if not decades.[14] However, the plan does not rule out eminent domain altogether. It calls for a study to see whether a vacant property, or even a well-maintained house, could be deemed blighted if all if the properties around it were deemed blighted. If this were so, the city could then use eminent domain selectively to acquire property from recalcitrant landowners.[15]

Finally, the plan calls for concentrating all commercial businesses near one of three nodes: Grand River and Lahser, West Outer Drive and Burt Road, and West Outer

Drive and Schoolcraft Street. At its peak, Brightmoor sustained retail establishments along several streets, but demand has decreased substantially. Now most of those stores have been demolished, and other burned out storefronts await the same fate. According to the report, the stores that remain are "not suitable for modern development" because they have zero-lot lines and lack on-site parking. The plan calls for demolishing all commercial buildings outside of the designated nodes, relocating them to where they can be rebuilt with parking on the side or in front.[16]

The net effect of these changes would be to make Brightmoor simultaneously more urban, more suburban, and more rural—a combination unseen in any other major city. Conservation areas would be the most urban, retaining their present density and character. The "city blocks" in the redevelopment zones would also be fairly dense once the existing gaps in the urban fabric were filled with urban gardens and new housing. But most of the redevelopment zone would be far less dense than before. Creating super blocks would reduce the number of streets in Brightmoor and make the area less walkable. The large "garden blocks" would have a suburban feel, with larger homes and wider lawns, and the "country blocks" would be more reminiscent of the countryside than the city. Their one-acre lots would feature farms and other agricultural uses not seen in Detroit for perhaps a century.

This emphasis on agriculture is perhaps the plan's most notable feature. The plan depends on the creation of semi-rural homesteads to resettle land. Yet unlike many of the grassroots proponents and practitioners of urban agriculture in Detroit, the report generally refers to agriculture only as an interim use—a way to steward the land as the neighborhood empties out, not necessarily as a way to drive the economy or rebuild the

community. There is little rhetoric here about creating a sustainable food system or educating residents about nutrition. Rather, urban gardening is being used to serve a planning purpose and to provide job opportunities where few currently exist. Yet most urban gardens and farms currently in Detroit are small, community-led efforts that earn little or no profit, so the feasibility of this approach is unclear.

The "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan" also reveals some of the tensions that will arise as larger tracts of property are assembled. One of the goals of rightsizing is to increase the value of residential and commercial land by making it scarcer. Designating more land for industrial or recreational use not only creates space for more industrial jobs and recreation opportunities, it also limits where new homes and businesses can be built, making each property somewhat more valuable than it had been before. Yet as large tracts of land are assembled, the temptation to deviate from the master plan for short-term gain may arise.

Take Eliza Howell Park, for example. The "Brightmoor Neigborhood Plan" seems to favor maintaining it as a regional park. Yet it acknowledges that letting the Howell family develop the park will provide tax revenue for the city and could also fund the maintenance of a smaller recreation area. On the other hand, residents will permanently lose an undeveloped green space and one of the neighborhood's most important assets. As decisions like these are made, residents and leaders will have to weigh the tradeoffs involved. Which is more valuable to the future of the neighborhood—maintaining the integrity of the park, even if the city cannot properly maintain it, or encouraging new development, even if it deviates from the master plan and reduces the scope of public space?

The Neighborhood Revitalization Strategic Framework

While the "Brightmoor Neighborhood Plan" provides an instructive example of a single-neighborhood rightsizing plan, its particular recommendations do not necessarily apply elsewhere in the city. Some equally troubled neighborhoods are located along major transit corridors, like Woodward Avenue, that may soon feature light rail or bus rapid transit. Even though these neighborhoods may be as sparsely populated as Brightmoor, they may nevertheless be suitable for new, dense development simply due to their location. Other areas, like the lower Cass Corridor, have historically had tighter street grids, more apartment buildings, and other characteristics of high-density areas. Although there is little demand today to develop the area's many vacant lots, it would make little sense to encourage suburban-style developments there or make changes to the street grid. The short-term gain from development would come at the expense of the long-term value of the neighborhood, damaging its historic character and squandering the advantages that come from its proximity to downtown.

The "Neighborhood Revitalization Strategic Framework" is valuable because it provides a frame of reference for evaluating the best way forward for *all* of Detroit's neighborhoods based on their particular characteristics. It was created over a 15-month period by a special task force of CDAD, the trade association for Detroit's community development organizations, which works to improve specific low and moderate-income neighborhoods in Detroit. Most of these non-profits are small, with only a handful of staff, and are run by residents of the respective neighborhoods they serve. They build low-income housing, administer city grants for home rehabilitation and commercial

façade improvement, organize community clean-ups, and take other action to preserve and rehabilitate their communities. In many ways, these are the city's greatest boosters, but in their new report, they acknowledge that "we will not reverse the loss of population for the foreseeable future, and that current conditions in Detroit's neighborhoods are socially, economically, and environmentally no longer sustainable."[17]

To make Detroit sustainable again, the report calls for classifying every area of the city based on a series of indicators. These are more nuanced than in previous proposals. Population density and the presence of blight are factors, but the CDAD report also considers proximity to anchoring institutions—like hospitals and schools—and the presence of block clubs, neighborhood associations, and community development organizations as important indicators of viability. If a neighborhood with some blight were located adjacent to a major anchoring institution, it might still be worth conserving. Similarly, a neighborhood with prominent blight—fire-damaged homes, significant vacancies, obvious litter—might still qualify for redevelopment if it were both adjacent to anchors *and* had strong block clubs and an active community development organization committed to its revival. The key determinant is not whether a neighborhood is blighted, but whether, all things considered, its future as a neighborhood is sustainable.[18]

Using these criteria, the report identifies eleven possible land uses in Detroit. This is an expansion upon the tri-part scheme used in previous triage proposals, which subdivided the city into just three areas: conservation, redevelopment, and depletion. In the CDAD report, each of those categories includes several possible land uses that can be improved through a specific set of policy changes. The report also acknowledges that a

single "neighborhood"—as judged by conventional wisdom about where its boundaries are—may encompass several different classification types.

Several different land uses roughly correspond to "conservation" and "redevelopment" zones. The most common is "traditional residential sector." These sectors are stable neighborhoods with single-family housing. Found all across Detroit, these areas would continue to see investment, including low and moderate-income infill housing where desired.[19] The report differentiates them from "village hubs." These hubs may also have predominantly single-family housing nearby, but they are anchored by a local intersection or main street where residents can shop, eat, and work. The report calls for mixed-use, medium-density development to make these areas more walkable and lively.[20] Finally, the plan identifies "city hubs" and "downtown." These areas correspond to the central business district and nearby neighborhoods, like Midtown and the New Center. These will be the site of Jane Jacobs-style urban development, with zero-lot lines, a mix of uses, and medium to high-density development.[21]

The most innovative component of the report, however, is the designation of "spacious residential transition zones." These are the areas akin to "depletion zones" in other plans, where abandoned homes and vacant lots rival occupied structures. Like previous proposals, the "Frameworks" report calls for a moratorium on new housing and commercial development in these areas. Unlike previous proposals, however, the report envisions three possible futures for these areas beyond just letting the weeds grow. They could evolve to become urban homestead sectors, naturescapes, or green venture zones.[22]

An urban homestead sector is similar to what was proposed in Brightmoor—a live/work area suitable for small-scale agriculture. The CDAD report enthusiastically

calls it, "Country living in the city!" What is unique about this proposal, however, is that CDAD also calls for rural-level services and taxes in these sectors. Property taxes would be reduced, and only the most basic services, such as police and fire protection, would be provided. Residents would rely on independent, alternative energy sources rather than the city's energy grid; the roads would be made of gravel instead of pavement; and people would be free to farm or pursue other agricultural enterprises on lots ranging of one acre or greater. At the same time, residents would only be a bus drive away from the amenities of the big city.[23]

A naturescape is a low-maintenance nature area with trails and other passive recreational uses. These would only be created in highly depopulated areas of Detroit where there are few blocks clubs and no community development organizations. Any current residents would have to move to a nearby neighborhood, where homes would be made available through a housing swap program. The naturescapes would be immediately adjacent to neighborhoods, so nearby residents could walk to them for recreation, and they would be connected to each other by a series of greenways—paths and streets designed for walking and biking. The naturescapes would be distinct from public parks because they would not offer active recreation opportunities, like play equipment or canoeing, only walking trails.[24]

A "green venture zone" is the third possibility. These areas, reclaimed from neighborhoods with vacant industrial buildings and empty homes, would be repurposed as "green and blue" industrial areas. As with the naturescape, current residents would need to move to nearby neighborhoods. Once cleared, the venture zone would be the site of sustainable energy projects, larger-scale organic farming, and enterprises yet unknown.

Possibilities include fish hatcheries, hydroponic and aquaculture centers, small market farms, horticulturalists, and foresters. The goal is to build on Detroit's manufacturing past, providing jobs without creating more pollution.

The overall objective of the CDAD plan is to make Detroit a national model of sustainable practices. Like earlier proponents of rightsizing, the authors hope to improve the fiscal situation of the city, but here that is only an ancillary goal. The primary focus is on creating jobs, raising the quality of life, and improving the environment. "We are committed to a Detroit where residents are employed within the city, where local entrepreneurial residents own local businesses. We see a Detroit that is a hub for sustainable green industry from farms to fisheries, but also boasts an abundance of natural green space—especially along our riverfront which is preserved for public use. We envision a city whose streets accommodate cars, but also light rail, bikes and walkers," they write.[25] Like the planners in Youngstown, the CDAD taskforce hopes to transform the discussion of rightsizing from one focused on shrinking and decline to one focused on creating a better future with more options for the city's residents.

V. Conclusion

In 1979, the pioneering urban economist James Heilbrun observed, “Until recently big-city mayors ritually denied the reality of decline. Today it is permissible to acknowledge that reality. In time it may become possible to advocate publicly a rational response to it."[1] Thirty years later, the “rational response” he advocated—rightsizing the Rust Belt for population decline—found its advocate in a big-city mayor. Speaking to WJR 950 in February, Mayor Dave Bing observed, “There is just way too much land and too much expense for us to continue to manage [Detroit] as we have in the past. So there are tough decisions that are going to have to be made, and there are going to be winners and losers. But in the end, we've gotta do what's right for the city's future."[2]

Not everyone agrees that rightsizing is what’s right for the city’s future. While the media and major foundations have rallied around the concept, many residents remain skeptical—even fearful. Detroit has a long history of displacing residents and destroying communities for little gain. The names Black Bottom and Poletown, two neighborhoods bulldozed in the name of progress, raise harrowing memories for many. Shea Howell, a columnist for the Michigan Citizen, has expressed concern that rightsizing will repeat this pattern, pushing residents aside without giving them a voice in the process. “The Mayor has not provided any plan to engage Detroiters in meaningful decision-making about the future of our city,” she warns.[3] The CDAD “Frameworks” report implicitly shares this concern; it calls for a “a change facilitation process that is humane and fair, and involves residents and local businesses through providing information openly, genuinely listening for feedback and ideas, and collaboratively planning our future—even when it is difficult, confrontive and time consuming.”[4]

Others have lamented the effect that rightsizing could have on the region's density. Many of the changes supported by proponents of rightsizing—eliminating streets, expanding the size of blocks, widening individual lots, and consolidating large tracts of land for parks and agriculture—would suburbanize or even ruralize central Detroit neighborhoods. Will Boisvert, writing in *The Baffler*, has called these changes "extravagantly wasteful from the larger perspective of metropolitan land use."[5] He contends that the region ought to be crafting new policies to move suburban residents back into the central city, not bringing the countryside into Detroit. Of course, with a third of the city's land already vacant, the ruralization of Detroit is well underway. But the question stands whether rightsizing is the appropriate response to population decline given the central city's role in the region.

More pressing yet are the unanswered questions of efficacy and economics. One of the key rationales given for rightsizing has been that it will reduce the costs of delivering city services. Will these savings be realized? Changes to Detroit's infrastructure and incentives for relocation will not come cheap. Furthermore, there are few examples to look toward to prove that residents will respond to rightsizing as hoped. Even in Youngstown, where the "shrinking" of the city has been widely embraced, no residents of the depopulated east side have yet accepted the city's offer of relocation assistance. If rightsizing policies prove unpopular in Detroit, they could spur even more residents to leave the city, deepening the problems that rightsizing purports to fix.

These are serious concerns that the Bing administration will need to address. The example of Youngstown suggests that the best way to do so is to lead the community in an open, collaborative dialogue on the future of the city. To be sure, that is easier said

than done. Detroit, after all, is of another scale than Youngstown. There are far more competing interests here. Youngstown did not have a single community development corporation before its planning process began; Detroit has dozens. In leading a public decision-making process, the Bing administration will have to mediate the concerns of dozens of churches, stores, non-profits, and neighborhood groups.

Yet if done successfully, engaging the public can yield tremendous rewards. In his "State of the City" address, Mayor Bing said, "We have an opportunity to reinvent Detroit like never before."[6] A more open process can help realize that opportunity. Inviting residents to help shape the vision of Detroit's future that is emerging among community leaders—that of a sustainable, entrepreneurial city blending urban, suburban, and rural influences—can dispel common myths about the administration's intentions, generate community buy-in, and, most importantly, empower residents to take control of the future of their own neighborhoods. If, however, the administration chooses another route, and attempts to impose rightsizing from above without genuine input from the community, history shows that the proposal will likely be met with resistance and its benefits will be muted.

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