Detroit at a Crossroads: Emerging From Crisis and Building Prosperity for All

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Detroit at a Crossroads:
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I. Preface & Introduction

In September 2008 the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity collaborated with the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion to release the report Opportunity for All: Inequity, Linked Fate and Social Justice in Detroit and Michigan. The paper documents the inequities facing Detroit and Michigan, inequities fueled by barriers to opportunity that depress prosperity for all of Michigan’s residents. The report was featured prominently in a January 2009 convening hosted by the Michigan Roundtable. At that convening stakeholders throughout Detroit and the civil rights community gathered to identify strategies for addressing inequity and bringing opportunity and prosperity to all of the people of Detroit.

Four years later, we revisit the themes addressed in our paper, looking at the dynamics of inequity, opportunity and prosperity in Detroit following the national housing crisis and one of the most devastating recessions in recent history. This crisis has left the city fiscally insolvent and facing the threat of losing local autonomy to an emergency fiscal manager. After weathering the storm of the foreclosure
crisis and recession, Detroit sits at a precipice, deeply challenged but ripe with opportunity, resiliency and a deep sense of community, qualities that are essential to the future of Detroit.

The following paper looks at conditions in Detroit today and proposes that equity, robust civic engagement and an opportunity oriented model of development and investment will be essential to fostering health and prosperity in this great city and throughout the State. It is critical that the building blocks of equity, engagement and opportunity be at the center of efforts to envision Detroit’s future. Historically, Detroit has been a prominent global city, a jewel of American ingenuity and prosperity. Today, Detroit presents a potential model for the future of urban America, a vision of what can be for cities across our nation, cities that have struggled with a history of segregation and dramatic economic transition. If Detroit is successful, it will serve as a model for revitalization, equity and sustainability for our nation’s cities and cities across the globe.

Figure 1: Ingredients for Prosperity: Equity, Engagement and Opportunity
II. Michigan & Detroit: Economic Crisis, Inequity and Barriers to Opportunity

Detroit, once our nation's fourth largest city, has experienced the steepest population decline of any major city in America. Detroit’s long term and systemic challenges are well documented and have been part of the national consciousness for some time. These challenges have been amplified by the recent economic crisis, escalating joblessness, poverty, foreclosures, abandonment, vacancy and community instability. A city long battered by suburban flight, segregation, urban decline and deindustrialization, Detroit now faces new challenges brought on by the housing crisis and deep recession.

The brunt of the fallout from unemployment, layoffs, social service and education budget cuts, foreclosures, and bankruptcies from the recent recession has been borne by groups already marginalized by the mainstream economy. In particular, the racial impacts of the recession and housing crisis have been extreme. For example, nearly half of all subprime loans went to African American and Latino borrowers, even though many qualified for prime loans. African American and Latino homeowners are expected to lose $164 - $213 billion in assets due to the housing crisis. In the wake of this crisis, the median wealth of white households is
now 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households.²

Neighborhoods and communities are being reshaped by the detrimental impacts of the housing crisis and recession. Communities already stressed with challenges such as high poverty, disinvestment and vacant properties prior to the foreclosure epidemic are now facing extreme conditions. The growth in vacant properties is further dragging down property values, creating extensive blight and safety risks and, in some cases, spiraling stable neighborhoods into a permanent state of distress and undermining entire cities.³

In the face of Michigan’s tremendous economic challenges from the past decade, many communities are struggling across the State. Michigan’s child poverty rate of 22.5% in 2009 was one of the highest state rates in the nation. The Brookings Institute predicts that in 2010 child poverty grew to 23%.⁴ Deep disparities can be found among many of Michigan’s communities, with the largest disparities impacting the State’s racial and ethnic populations. The poverty rate for African Americans in Michigan was 35% in 2009, double the State average (16%) and nearly 30% of Latinos were living in poverty.⁵ The recession has exacerbated many of the State’s economic disparities, with the unemployment rate for Black men in Michigan at 28% in 2010, more than double the state average of 12%.⁶ Economic challenges have been particularly damaging to children of color. While one in five children in Michigan was living in poverty, poverty rates for non-White children increased 50% between 2000 and 2009, with one in two African-American children and one in three Latino children living in poverty in 2009.⁷

In the Detroit region, figures on poverty, joblessness and inequality illustrate the depth of challenges emerging from the housing crisis and the recession. The city of Detroit’s poverty rate in 2011 was 40.9% and child poverty rates were 57%.⁸ A recent study by Data Driven Detroit found poverty to be rising throughout many communities in the Detroit region, with the share of the region’s population living in poverty in Detroit’s suburbs increasing from 45% in 2000 to 59%.⁹ Currently ten percent of the labor force in the Detroit metropolitan region is unemployed, but substantial inequities exist within these general unemployment statistics.¹⁰ At the peak of the recession in 2010, nearly one in four of Detroit’s African American workers were unemployed, although this figure has declined to less than 1 in 5 in 2011.¹¹
Extreme community-level disparities and racial segregation are also prominent in many of the State’s urban areas. Looking at conditions in the Detroit metropolitan area, we can begin to grasp the severity of segregation and isolation from opportunity facing many urban communities of color. The Detroit region has the Nation’s highest rates of racial segregation in schools and housing, ranking first in both measures out of 329 metropolitan areas.\textsuperscript{12} These barriers to opportunity combine to further isolate racial populations in these urban communities. On average, African Americans in the Detroit region live in neighborhoods with poverty rates nearly quadruple the rates experienced by Whites. Similarly, for the average African American in the Detroit region, both neighborhood vacancy rates and unemployment rates were nearly double the rates experienced by Whites.\textsuperscript{13}

The Detroit MSA has the largest degree of “job sprawl” and spatial mismatch for African Americans in the nation. The Brookings Institute found that more than 90\% of employment in the Detroit region had moved outside of the core business district in the region, while nearly 75\% of African Americans in the region were physically segregated from jobs.\textsuperscript{14} (Nationally, only about 1/3 of Whites and more than 1/2 of African Americans were found to be spatially segregated from employment.)\textsuperscript{15} Segregation also means that more students of color in the Detroit are trapped in the region’s worst performing schools. More than 4 out of 5 African American students in Macomb, Wayne and Oakland counties attend just three school districts.\textsuperscript{16}

Geography, race and poverty are intertwined in many of the state’s urban communities from Benton Harbor to Saginaw and Flint to Detroit. Given the importance of these communities to the State’s economic health and economic competiveness, these disparities will severely limit the Michigan’s economic potential. Understanding these community- and neighborhood-based challenges is critical to understanding the barriers to opportunity facing many of Detroit’s residents. Neighborhood conditions and access to opportunity play a significant role in determining life outcomes. Five decades of social science research have documented the connection between racially and economically isolated neighborhoods and depressed outcomes for individuals.

Concentrated poverty can depress student academic achievement regardless of individual promise. Neighborhood racial and economic educational segregation can have severe consequences for a child’s future.\textsuperscript{17} New studies show that living in a
severely disadvantaged neighborhood is the equivalent to missing an entire year of school. Meant to be the great engine of equal opportunity, our public education system is instead growing more racially and economically segregated, transferring and expanding inequality across generations. Unfortunately, neighborhood polarization seems to be growing nationwide. For example, researchers recently found that the number of middle class neighborhoods declined by 30% since 1970, while low-income and high-income neighborhoods grew by 32% and 53%, respectively.

Neighborhood racial and economic segregation also have negative health consequences. A review of research on neighborhood effects on health concluded that residents of poor segregated neighborhoods experience poorer health outcomes because of increased exposure to the toxic substances that are disproportionately sited in their communities, and because of barriers to sustaining healthy behaviors, such as limited access to good grocery stores. Recently, researchers in Seattle found that property values, more than income or education levels, are the best predictor of obesity rates, most likely due to the neighborhood presence or absence of grocery stores with affordable healthy food in safe walking distance.

Nationwide, children living in high-poverty urban communities have levels of lead in their blood that are nine times above the average, a condition linked to attention deficit disorder and irreversible loss of cognitive functioning. Children growing up in very poor families with low social status can also experience unhealthy levels of stress hormones, levels that can impair neural development. Health problems can shorten a student’s attention span and cause the student to miss school and fall behind. The impact of health status on school achievement is critically important. It is estimated that 25% of the achievement gap in education is attributable to differences in child and maternal health. In short, neighborhood context and access to opportunity—from preventative health care to high-performing schools—can deeply affect a child’s opportunities to learn and grow.
III. The Rebirth of Detroit: Resiliency, Healing Community

In response to these challenges, extensive philanthropic, non-profit, community based, grass roots, public sector and private sector efforts have been initiated to reverse the damaging spiral of decline the city has endured, while envisioning a new future for Detroit. These efforts and this collective energy will be critical to ensuring a vibrant, healthy, sustainable and equitable future for Detroit. New ways of thinking about issues like economic growth, food security, environmental health, fiscal sustainability and community development and approaching solutions with collaborative energy present tremendous opportunity for the City, the region and for all major cities that face similar challenges.

The Metropolitan Truth Commission Process

The Michigan Roundtable is facilitating one region wide effort to directly reflect upon and address the history of inequity in Detroit. The Metropolitan Truth Commission Process for Metropolitan Detroit is the first step in a healing process to understand the historical effects of discrimination on the Detroit community. Truth commissions by nature are set up to bring to the surface a narrative of the problem that hasn’t been told, a narrative that has been oppressed in communities over a period of time. Truth Commissions engage those
least likely to be engaged in a process of investigation and healing. The commissions are believed support the possibility of transforming a community in a way that leads to justice for those most oppressed by the structures and institutions.

Truth commissions are non-judicial, independent panels of inquiry typically set up to establish the facts and context of serious violations of human rights. The commissions’ members are usually empowered to conduct research, support victims and propose policy recommendations to prevent recurrence of violations. Most commissions focus victim’s needs as a path toward reconciliation and reducing conflict over the past. Truth commissions have been established on every continent in efforts to address a variety of violations against humanity. For more info about truth commissions please visit www.ICTJ.org.

The truth commission is guided by the belief that racial segregation in Metro Detroit (past and present) and the resulting inequity overtime in this region is a violation of basic human rights. Therefore, the Michigan Roundtable, in association with the Housing Project Partnership, began preparations for a Metro Detroit Truth Commission in January of 2010 based on the ideology of the International Center for Transitional Justice and inspired by the commissions of South Africa and Greensboro, North Carolina. The Partnership established a declaration of intent in June of 2010 and finalized a charter to guide the commission in April of 2011. The selection process lasted from July 15 to October 31 of 2011, a period during which a representative selection panel accepted public nominations and deliberated.

The selection panel sought to elect nine nominees “of recognized integrity and principle, with a demonstrated commitment to the values of truth, reconciliation, equality and justice.” To best represent the interests of the region, the selection panel also considered racial, socio-economic, religious, gender, and geographic diversity.

The commission is now a completely free and independent entity from the Roundtable but it is our hope that their recommendations arrived at from their research, testimony, community organizing and analysis will light the way for continued work in this region towards racial equity. We as a region need the stories to be told and heard so to find the truth and move forward.
The launch of the Detroit Future City plan can be another powerful milestone in the continued rebirth of the City of Detroit. The report, culminating from two years of planning activities, engagements and meetings facilitated by Detroit Works has identified approximately 150 recommendations to foster the continued revitalization of Detroit. The plan has been received with optimism by leaders in the community and the effort has received a pledge of $150 million in implementation support, pledged primarily by the Kresge Foundation and other philanthropic partners. This pledge of financial support is critical to moving the planning process from concept to implementation and reality, creating yet another tremendous opportunity for Detroit. We hope that throughout the implementation process, the lessons learned from equity focused efforts, such as the truth commission and a commitment to equity, opportunity and engagement remains at the forefront of implementation. In the closing chapter of this paper, we present three principles, equity, engagement and opportunity based development, as critical guiding principles to inform these future implementation efforts.
Emerging From Crisis and Building Prosperity for All

IV. A Vision for the Future and Equitable, Prosperous and Sustainable Detroit

While facing some of the most severe challenges in the City’s history, there is reason for optimism. Detroit sits at a crossroads which can lead to a new vision and a better future. The city is in the process of considering how to re-envision its future. After decades of population loss and a declining tax base, there are serious investments, engagements and discussions taking place to re-envision Detroit’s future. In other communities, change tends to happen unevenly. Some neighborhoods may experience economic and social changes while others are largely unaffected. This is far from the case in Detroit, where the entire city is undergoing many of the same large-scale economic and social change. The wide-ranging effects of these changes require new and collaborative solutions that ensure that all voices are heard. Three principles must guide these efforts: a commitment to equity and inclusion, robust civic engagement and adherence to an opportunity oriented model of development.

a. Equity & Inclusion: Why it Matters

Like an ailing patient’s vital signs, the State’s deep inequities across the domains of race, place and class are indicators of peril for Michigan’s future. As we move further into our 21st century economy and learn how our economy is changing,
the push for collaboration, innovation, and harnessing our intellectual capital will be critical. In fact, a 2006 Federal Reserve study found that a skilled workforce, high levels of racial inclusion, and improved income equality correlate strongly and positively with economic growth at the regional level. But, an innovation-based economy will struggle to succeed without an educated, healthy and skilled labor force.

Research supports the proposition that greater strides towards equity promote a stronger economy and that inequality is harmful to economic growth. Professor William Easterly of New York University found that societies that are not as economically polarized, where a middle class exists, have more income and growth. Ohio State University’s Mark Partridge found that “a greater share of income going to the middle-income quintiles within states leads to higher levels of growth.” Lastly, the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research examined growth in 118 regions from 1994–2004 and found that racial inclusion and income equality were positively correlated with economic growth measures including employment, output, productivity, and per capita income.

This presents a tremendous challenge to both our economic future. In the United States, the economic gap between the poor and wealthy continues to widen; more alarming, 46 percent of children born into poverty remain poor throughout their lifetime. Unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that African-Americans and Latinos have endured higher unemployment rates than Whites during the Great Recession. As the American population undergoes a shift in demographics, improved access to jobs, education and health will be imperative for the sustainability of America.

What do we mean by “equity”? The term equity has been defined by scholars, researchers and activists as fair access to critical opportunity structures, such as education, employment and health care, across class, race and ethnic populations. In this context, connecting people to opportunity creates positive, transformative change in communities. Ensuring equity does not take away from the role of personal responsibility; equity enables individuals and communities to pursue a healthy life and to open pathways to the resources, knowledge and freedom needed to overcome barriers to opportunity. Equity ensures that all communities have access to critical resources and that all people have positive choices to live in healthy opportunity rich communities where they can thrive.
Choice and opportunity are fundamental principles of American society. Equity provides a framework for ensuring that all Americans, regardless of their economic conditions, race, ethnicity, disability or location have the ability to make informed and productive choices. Equity provides all Americans with pathways to success in critical opportunity domains including education, sustainable employment, the ability to build wealth and the freedom to live in a safe and healthy community. Equity implies more than just equal treatment; it acknowledges the systematic challenges facing some communities and seeks to connect these marginalized communities to opportunities that are vital to living a healthy life and pursuing the American dream. In short, equity provides the building blocks to success in our society, a foundation to support healthy choices, healthy communities and ultimately a healthier society.

By addressing inequity, Detroit will be a healthier region, a more economically viable state, and a community which is more strategic, efficient and effective in using investments and public resources. Equity and inclusion assuring—ensuring access to opportunity for all of Detroit’s residents— will be critical to ensuring that Detroit’s most precious resource, all of its people, are prepared and capable of fully participating in Detroit’s economic future.

b. Building from the Ground Up: Robust Civic Engagement

Detroit is a large, diverse collection of communities with people from myriad backgrounds and many different visions for the city’s future. Residents from all socio-economic backgrounds, as well as corporations, and government officials all play a part in shaping this unique tapestry of the city and shape the reality of its inhabitants. Considering the enormous changes that the City of Detroit will face in the oncoming years, providing for a robust, interactive, and meaningful civic engagement process will be key to ensuring successful outcome for all communities. Yet many of the city’s most disadvantaged communities lack the civic infrastructure needed to participate fully in the reimagining of Detroit, and traditional planning processes are often inadequate to ensure robust civic engagement in disadvantaged communities. Robust civic engagement processes should balance both citizen-based and government-based engagement activities. Engagement activities should openly embrace “bottom up” or community-led activities and interactions. Engagement processes should be highly participatory in nature and not viewed as simple information sharing with disadvantaged
Communities. Community members should feel that their efforts and involvement are appreciated and valued and will potentially impact planning outcomes. Engagement activities should identify, explore, and focus on issues of concern for disadvantaged communities.

Civic engagement should also help build local networks of engaged community members. These local networks can be powerful mechanisms for sharing information, technical skills, and scaling up smaller successful initiatives. Successful engagement must work to expand the web of stakeholders involved in the planning process, from traditional or formal stakeholders to non-traditional or informal groups such as community networks, civic clubs, parent and education groups, youth organizations, religious leaders and citizens. Consortia should build extensive local networks for civic engagement, using multiple methods of publicizing activities and types of engagement activities to attract a diverse constituency.

The following principles can help ensure that all efforts to envision Detroit’s future support robust civic engagement and support social capital building among all of Detroit’s residents, especially its most marginalized communities and those who face significant barriers to opportunity.

**Trust** is essential to effective civic engagement with traditionally marginalized or excluded communities. Committing resources, consistency, and a sense of cultural competency show marginalized residents’ true commitment to the process and encourage engagement and build good will and trust between communities and planning officials. Public sector entities must also be transparent in sharing information, details on process, goals, and decision making approaches to planning initiatives. Conflict must be dealt with in an open and constructive way to promote collaborative engagement. Disagreements and conflicts should be discussed openly but with sensitivity to disadvantaged communities. For a true trusting relationship to occur between marginalized communities and public officials, it is critical for disadvantaged communities to act in more than just an advisory role but to be actively involved in decision making processes.

Robust engagement builds trust and **empowerment** by moving away from simply soliciting information in a passive way in favor of targeted engagement designed to build more community involvement, collaboration, and empowerment.
Engagement activities can be used as not only a process to inform decision makers but also as an educational opportunity for the public. The more that these individual community members learn about how developments arise and how policy is made, the more power they have to play a leadership role in reshaping their communities. Emphasizing engagement processes that emphasize empowered or effective participation over efficient participation is key to bringing the power of development closer to individual residents.

Engagement with communities must recognize the diverse voices within the community and integrate them into engagement approaches. Community residents represent a wide variety of racial and ethnic populations, cultural norms, languages, and geographic characteristics, each with distinct barriers to opportunity. Additionally, community members, particularly in traditionally marginalized communities tend to engage with the community in different ways. While some community members may feel comfortable within the established civic engagement infrastructure, others may feel that they can make the most change working to highlight disparities in local policies from outside of the system. Ultimately all of these engagement styles can be useful in bringing about equitable solutions to community challenges. While engagement should be a universal goal, targeted and tailor-made approaches can be used to effectively engage with a diverse number of communities.

Finally, civic engagement with youth provides an opportunity to add emerging voices to public dialogue and build leadership that can carry policies forward as time moves on. Youth engagement can also be a transformative interaction in disadvantaged communities by providing an empowering educational experience and nurturing crucial relationships with positive peers, mentors, and role models. Youth engagement activities should seek to increase civic skills (developing critical thinking skills, cooperation and group problem solving), civic knowledge (understanding relevant issues and how public policy relates to
community concerns) and civic efficacy (how to design community initiatives or how to work with policymakers). Many young people can be engaged through volunteer opportunities, especially those coordinated by trusted community institutions or faith-based organizations. These experiences can enhance engagement with youth and provide multiple avenues for community youth to be informed, to feel that they have a new understanding of community challenges, and to have influenced over outcomes, leading them to become more comfortable taking leadership positions later in life.

c. An Opportunity Oriented Model of Development

Economic initiatives such as The Woodward Avenue Collaborative and the M1 Rail Line are bringing new opportunities to Detroit. However, these new developments are also bringing new residents to the city and are poised to change Detroit communities economically and socially. These changes could bring economic opportunity to new and existing residents, or leave many marginalized residents without access to new economic gains. Any planning or community redevelopment initiative brings the potential for gentrification, and the fear of displacement by existing residents.

Redevelopment Conflicts – Gentrification vs. Revitalization

Gentrification is a complicated topic and the term “gentrification” can be inaccurately used whenever neighborhood change or investment occurs, sometimes resulting in unnecessary tension or conflict over any neighborhood improvement, demographic change or investment. What is clear is that certain neighborhood changes which can accompany reinvestment can be detrimental if not properly managed and if they lead to a large degree of displacement in a community. To avoid this conflict and to work against redevelopment policies which will create wide spread displacement, we must first properly define and utilize the term “gentrification” and work within a more productive framework of neighborhood change, often represented by the terminology, neighborhood revitalization.

Without defining gentrification, it becomes impossible to determine if gentrification is occurring within a neighborhood. Viewpoints on what gentrification is may vary significantly, and based on these misconstrued definitions identifying the impacts of gentrification becomes difficult. The term is often mistakenly intermixed
with urban revitalization or is used to describe any physical investment within a neighborhood. These definitions are flawed and miss an important distinction. Gentrification is not simply reinvestment into the neighborhood, gentrification is a process that extensively dislocates traditional low income residents (usually residents of color) and extensively changes the social fabric of the neighborhood.

Research by the Brookings Institute provides the best working definition of gentrification:  

“Gentrification: the process by which higher income households displace significant numbers of lower income residents of a neighborhood, thus changing the essential character and flavor of the neighborhood. Based on this definition, three specific conditions must be met: displacement of original residents, physical upgrading of most of the housing stock and change in neighborhood character.”

This working definition produced by the Brookings Institute continues to address what gentrification does not entail. Gentrification is not occurring if higher income residents move into a neighborhood at a scale that is too small to displace existing residents, or if redevelopment is targeted toward abandoned or vacant structures or lots. Also, the existence of economic development activity (revitalization) does not automatically provide for gentrification. Gentrification is the process of permanently changing a distressed community into an exclusive upper income community and does not simply equate with community reinvestment.

By using this narrow definition it is easier to understand the negative impacts of gentrification and easier to distinguish revitalization from gentrification. Gentrification (by this definition) is not a healthy phenomenon for a community. The displacement caused by gentrification falls most heavily on disenfranchised low income resident. Gentrification also does little to address concentrated poverty, instead shifting the low income population into neighboring communities, further concentrating poverty in nearby areas.

Neighborhood improvement (or revitalization) is not synonymous with gentrification. Neighborhood reinvestment can occur and improve the quality of life for existing residents without the widespread displacement associated with gentrification.
Detroit at a Crossroads:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gentrification:</th>
<th>Revitalization:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Widespread displacement of traditional low income residents by affluent households.</td>
<td>Mixed income housing development, displacement avoided.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residents unable to accrue wealth, remain highly susceptible to displacement.</td>
<td>Wealth building strategies for existing residents implemented, residents stabilized from displacement pressure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existing social networks, neighborhood services and local businesses disrupted in the community.</td>
<td>Social networks, neighborhood services and businesses reinforced in the community. Additional new business and services expand options for all residents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community transitions to an exclusive community, inaccessible to low income households.</td>
<td>Community transitions to a mixed income, mixed wealth and diverse community.</td>
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Research organizations, social equity advocates, and community development practitioners have been pushing for a new model of development that does not gentrify the community. These new development models have been labeled as “equitable development” or “community revitalization”. All of these new models of development share certain characteristics.

- The distressed community transitions into a mixed income, mixed wealth and diverse community.
- The social networks and services utilized by traditional residents are maintained and improved.
- Existing neighborhood businesses are supported while additional viable businesses are created in the community.
- Neighborhood improvement not only focuses on improving the physical environment but focuses on creating wealth and opening opportunities (such as employment and education) to existing residents.
- Development is guided by local community engagement and redevelopment efforts should be focused on building civic power and civic capacity for existing residents.

What is clear, is that widespread displacement is not a sustainable model of neighborhood redevelopment. Also, many mitigation methods exist to offset the pressures for gentrification and to support more equitable community
revitalization. Honest, open, and equitable conversations about gentrification and how development decisions are made are crucial for ensuring that all Detroit residents are able to share in the renewed investments in communities.

A beneficial approach to this conversation is the Kirwan Institute’s “Opportunity Communities” model. Our model promotes equitable planning and development by bringing attention to the many factors that people depend on to access opportunity. Factors such as housing, education, jobs, transportation, health, and engagement stand at the center of one’s life and community. This approach is based on the premise that everyone should have fair access to the critical opportunity structures and the necessary social infrastructure to succeed in life and that affirmatively connecting people to opportunity creates positive, transformative change in communities.
V. Conclusion: Phoenix from the Ashes – Appling These Principles to Re-envision Detroit

Cities like Detroit, where residents are overwhelmed by budgetary problems, high unemployment, population loss, and urban disinvestment, are finding that they must do more with less. However, as leaders begin to implement projects and proposals to reconfigure city services and investments, challenges associated with issues such as fairness, sensitivity, historic integrity, and economic disparity are becoming more prominent. Additionally, the political and economic climate of Detroit has long been tinged by racial and economic inequality, from housing and school segregation to much more recent issues related to school takeovers, municipal services, and economic disinvestment in communities of color.

In Detroit, the scale and scope of systemic and historically persistent urban community development problems present a tremendous challenge. A number of impediments converge to systematically disadvantage urban neighborhoods. To be successful, efforts to mitigate these obstacles must be multi-faceted, targeting a number of critical intervention points. For example, targeted revitalization
efforts may require simultaneous support for education, housing and economic development initiatives. Long term and comprehensive responses are needed, as described by Jonathan Fanton, former President of the MacArthur Foundation:

“...sustainable neighborhood improvement requires long-term, simultaneous investment in all the issues—schools, housing, health, jobs, economic development, safety, community cohesion, and more—that must improve together in a reinforcing virtuous circle. Practically speaking, this may mean applying a comprehensive lens and working first on the few interventions with the greatest potential to stimulate further change.”

This simple yet eloquently stated approach is inherently more complex when attempted in a large city, with stark disparities, numerous stakeholders, shifting populations, unstable neighborhoods and institutions, and numerous simultaneous interventions.

Another challenge posed by this process is ensuring that social equity and the needs of marginalized residents are prioritized in the planning process. Many of the city’s most disadvantaged communities will lack the civic infrastructure to participate fully in the reimagining of Detroit, and traditional planning processes are often inadequate to ensure robust civic engagement in these communities.

To be successful and sustainable, efforts to reposition Detroit for the future will require a planning process grounded in robust civic engagement with transparency and public access to information. The following strategies utilize the principles of equity, engagement and opportunity to improve efforts to re-envision Detroit and support just and sustainable outcomes.

**Focusing on Equity & Inclusion:**

The sheer scale of the planning processes such as the one facing Detroit is unprecedented and can lead to problems maintaining social equity by itself. A large scale process that does not focus on the needs of marginalized communities and does not include robust engagement for these communities increases the likelihood that planning efforts could become inequitable to existing residents and community partners. Large urban renewal projects in the 1960’s and more recent HOPE VI housing projects revealed a number of inequities that could be traced to a lack of flexibility, transparency and evaluation.
Given the unprecedented scale of the process ahead, there exist no prior examples or best practices to fall back on. This highlights the critical importance of a deliberative process and a more robust, in-depth and ongoing evaluation component. Everything from administrative process to the formation of goals and definitions of common terms must be agreed on among all stakeholders. This will help aid in more accurate evaluation that can move the process forward. This means actively engaging with stakeholders to identify key concepts and equity measurements to ensure that traditionally marginalized groups are accounted for in an effective manner.

Stakeholders and officials should reframe the process from a deficit-based planning model into one that reflects forward-looking positive planning, which seeks to create a collaborative plan that can regenerate and grow resources. When planning focuses on resource scarcity, this “deficit based” approach, can often create a “triage” scenario, leaving officials to decide between helping one community over another.

When the planning process is not properly framed, it may create a competitive environment among stakeholders, particularly where there are racial or cultural differences. Unfortunately, emphasizing competition between varying groups or neighborhoods tends to actually harden opposition to disadvantaged groups among the public. We suggest conducting the planning process within an “opportunity frame” which appeals to the core American belief that everyone should have a chance to achieve their full potential and focuses attention on finding solutions in a collaborative manner.

**Focusing on Robust Engagement:**

Emphasize a collaborative process that empowers participants and builds neighborhood capacity for the long term, rather than a technical and formal exercise. There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of embracing robust engagement techniques that empower individuals and communities and invites them to become an important part of the decision-making process. Community-led strategies provide a level of agency for already existing residents that can help guarantee social equity in the shrinkage process. Efforts that place the process further away from marginalized communities can create an imbalance of power within the process that may limit their input.
Focusing on Opportunity:

Recognize the long-term nature of the process and adopt an approach which seeks to expand opportunity and support community building. A planning process of this scale promises to be long, with far-reaching effects on families, neighborhoods, and the region. It would be to the advantage of all stakeholders to transform the process from a discreet remediation of current conditions to a long-term investment strategy centered on creating new opportunities for traditionally marginalized populations. Much of the current efforts surrounding shrinking cities has thus far centered around traditional economic and real estate development while slighting issues of social equity and capacity-building in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Shifting the focus of the process to long-term, capacity building to support and expand opportunity structures within neighborhoods will better position Detroit’s residents and communities to thrive in the future. Re-envisioning Detroit’s future must be more than just balancing the City’s finances but should be tied to efforts to invest in the region’s greatest assets, its people and its communities, and in fostering equity, inclusion and opportunity for all residents.
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19 For schools consisting of 90%-100% Latino or Black students, 87.7% are poor. Students in minority schools are 16.3 times more likely to be enrolled in a school with high concentrations of poverty. See the report by Orfield et al. “Deepening Segregation in American Public Schools: A Special Report from the Harvard Project on School Desegregation.” *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 30:2 (1997): pages 11-12.


24 Cookson, Clive. “Poverty mars formation of infant brains.” *Financial Times.com* 2/16/2008. (The biggest negative effects were found on language and memory.)

25 Asthma, for example, is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism. Low-income children and children of color experience higher rates of asthma than affluent, non-White children. US Environmental Protection Agency. May 2005. Managing Asthma in the School Environment. [http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/managingasthma.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/managingasthma.html);


29 Treuhaft, Sarah and David Madland. *Prosperity 2050 Is Equity the Superior Growth Model? PolicyLink*. April 2011


31 Treuhaft, Sarah and David Madland. *Prosperity 2050 Is Equity the Superior Growth Model? PolicyLink*. April 2011


