
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Segregation and racial politics long the death knell for regionalism in Detroit area

Original Reporting | By Mike Alberti | History, Race, Urban Policy

COMPETITION INSTEAD OF COOPERATION

In [Part 1 of our series](#), we looked at how proposals to deal with the current crisis ignore or exacerbate long-term problems.

In Part 2, [we looked at a series of proposals from the 1970s](#) that attempted to treat Detroit as an integral part of a single metropolitan region, proposals that many experts say would have radically altered Detroit's trajectory from then to now.

Here, we probe the obstacles to achieving regional cooperation, obstacles driven in significant measure by the narrow perspectives held both by city officials and advocates as well by their suburban counterparts.

Finally, in Part 4, we will examine the nature and plausibility of the solutions — at the local, regional, state, and federal levels— that would need to be put in place if anyone were serious about trying to help Detroit thrive at any time soon.

— Editor

Jan. 11, 2012 — The Detroit metropolitan area, has a long history of racial antagonism between the city and its suburbs. According to Thomas J. Sugrue, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, that antagonism was the primary reason for the failure of regional cooperation that could have mitigated or even prevented Detroit's decline.

"Especially after the devastating riot of 1967, the racial divisions and antagonism between the city and the suburbs became extremely entrenched," he said. "The racial hostility made it very hard, politically, to get anything done cooperatively."

According to Joe T. Darden, an assistant professor of geography at Michigan State University and a co-author of *Detroit, Race, and Uneven Development*, it has long been customary for both city and suburban residents and policy makers to view regional policy through a lens tinted by racial and class-based prejudice.

"Whenever these proposals have come around, the only thing people have thought about is how their particular group, their community, is going to lose," he said. "Even when it might benefit them in the long term, the tendency is to see every policy as benefiting the other side more."

Suburban resistance

When policy makers began talking about regionalism in the 1970s, the suburban towns surrounding Detroit were almost exclusively white. Through a mixture of local antagonism, workplace discrimination, and segregated housing policies at all levels of government, African Americans were largely shut out of these communities, Sugrue said.

“People saw the suburbs as being sanctuaries from the city, which they associated with crime and violence,” he said.

According to June Manning Thomas, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Michigan, the suburban official who best exemplified that attitude was Orville Hubbard, who served as mayor of Dearborn, a nearby suburb, from 1942 to 1978. Hubbard was an out-spoken critic of integration, and built much of his political base by promising to keep Dearborn “lily white.” In his 1989 biography of Hubbard, the writer David L. Good [quotes Hubbard as saying](#), after the 1967 riots in Detroit, “I’m not a racist, but I just hate those black bastards.”

When, in the 1972 case of *Milliken v. Bradley*, a federal District Court Judge required that children in Detroit schools be bused to suburban schools and vice-versa, in order to desegregate the Detroit Public School District, the decision provoked an intense response in the suburbs. In the suburb of Wyandotte, an effigy of Steven Roth, the District judge who decided the case, was hung at the end of a mock trial. (As detailed by [Part 2](#) of this series, the Supreme Court ultimately reversed the District Court’s decision and held the suburbs harmless from the desegregation remedy.)

A similar, if less heated, reaction was provoked when then-Governor William Milliken proposed a form of regional tax base sharing in 1975. Milliken proposed a system whereby new tax revenue would be shared between Detroit and its suburbs as a way of shoring up Detroit’s tax base.

“People in the suburbs thought that the reason for Detroit’s problems was because it had become a black city. So the attitude was, ‘why am I going to pay for this?’” Darden said.

Darden said that Coleman Young’s election as Detroit’s first African American mayor in 1973 crystallized the suburban perception of Detroit as a black city, which made it easier for suburban residents to think about Detroit as distinct and separate from their own towns. As the city’s decline continued, Young advocated frequently for — and occasionally won — more funding from the state, which the suburbs

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perceived as “stealing” their tax dollars. The issue culminated near the end of Young’s term, when Judge John Chmura, running for a district judgeship in Warren, put Young’s face on the body of a Robin Hood character in his campaign literature.

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“As Detroit lost its tax base, the suburbs saw every attempt to make regional policy as basically taking money out of their pockets to help those blacks in Detroit,” Darden said. “Every issue became about them losing in terms of their economic interests.”

“There are two parts in segregation”

The majority of resistance to regional policy has historically come from the suburbs, but the City of Detroit has also, at times, refused to cooperate with its neighbors, Sugrue said. While suburban resistance was primarily based on racial antagonism and the impression that the city was attempting to “steal” tax revenue, resistance in Detroit was based on the view that regional cooperation required the city to give up some measure of political power.

“For the first time, you had black representation of a black city,” Joe T. Darden said. “People were not very interested in giving up some of their legislative and administrative power to a suburban entity where blacks would again be the minority.”

“When Coleman Young was elected, the perception was that now that an African American was mayor, the city could get about the business of rebuilding itself in furtherance of the needs and requirements of the majority of residents in Detroit,” said John Mogk, a professor of law at Wayne State University. “There was no reason to cooperate with the suburbs. It was just a matter of getting things done.”

Darden agreed, and pointed out that city officials have historically opposed every effort to create a system of regional governance in the Detroit metro area, believing that their political power would be diluted.

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This attitude was typified by an [op-ed by Detroit City Councilmember Erma Henderson](#) printed in the Ann Arbor Sun in December of 1975. Henderson was writing in response to a proposed bill that had

been introduced in the State Legislature to create a regional governance body to facilitate regional planning and coordination.

The bill, she wrote:

...would, in effect, set up a new layer of government for the residents of Detroit: a regional government with broad powers to make decisions on land and planning. It is a bill that you need to be informed about, because if you have ever had trouble ‘telling it to City Hall,’ how can your concerns be addressed in a government that would take in six counties and diminish the functions of city government?

Despite the fight for resources between the urban (city) and the suburban communities, by keeping our present governmental structure, we can *bargain* for our fair share through a position of relative strength in political power. This is what blacks, other minorities and poor people were able to attain in the city election in 1973.

According to Myron Orfield, the director of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota, the mutual resistance to cooperation is typical of highly segregated regions. “There are always two partners in segregation,” he said. “In the case of Detroit, you have political leaders that view power as being more important than success.”

“No one saw how they might gain”

“In the suburbs, they were saying ‘I’m going to lose my money,’ and in the city, they were saying, ‘I’m going to lose my political power,’” Darden said. “No one saw how they might gain.”

In retrospect, Mogk said, it is clear that Detroit would have gained from the regional measures that its leaders either failed to advocate for or opposed. “If there’s anybody in the city who wouldn’t want to go back in time and put some kind of regional tax base sharing into place back then, they would be crazy,” he said. “There is no doubt that that would have benefited Detroit immensely.”

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In the case of tax base sharing, that means that the suburbs would, indeed, have lost revenue, at least in the short-term. But according to Mogk, there is no reason to believe that the loss of revenue would have had a large effect. “It’s not as if these towns would have gone bankrupt,” he said. Because tax base sharing systems generally only pool revenue from *new* growth, it may have limited the rapid growth of some suburban towns, he said, but it would probably not have imposed much of a financial burden on the existing towns.

And according to Orfield, there is reason to believe that the suburbs might actually have gained from tax base sharing and other regional proposals.

A large body of academic literature, beginning in the mid-1970s, provides evidence that central cities and their suburbs are interdependent. In a [landmark paper](#), University of Louisville professor H.V. Savitch found that changes in per capita income in cities tend to be mirrored to some degree in their suburbs. In another paper, Savitch found that those metropolitan areas with greater disparities between suburbs and central cities tend to have lower overall growth than metros with less disparity.

Orfield himself has conducted several more recent studies along similar lines. In one study, he found that metro areas where there exists a substantial amount of regional cooperation — such as the Minneapolis-St. Paul or Portland, Ore. — have consistently outperformed more fragmented metro areas — such as Detroit — in terms of both income growth and overall economic growth.

“We’ve understood for a long time that outcomes in the suburbs are intertwined with outcomes in their central city,” he said. “It’s more complicated than just saying that the city gains at the expense of the suburbs. If Detroit were more of a vital city, then that would benefit suburban residents as well as city residents.”

Darden agreed, and pointed out that those who were advocating for greater regional cooperation in the Detroit area in the 1970s failed to make the case for mutual benefit.

“Nobody ever presented a win-win case,” he said. “Everybody was so concerned with one set of interests and nobody was saying, ‘Look, this would benefit us all.’”

“People learn to operate within the context of a highly segregated society,” Orfield added. “Everybody likes that better. It’s easier to just think about your own narrow interests. But it’s a catastrophe. Thinking that way has always been a catastrophe. A segregated region has never been fully functional. It’s never worked.”

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