
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

New York Times flogs pension problems, ignores regional context in Detroit post-mortem

Press Criticism | By Mike Alberti | New York Times, Urban Policy

March 13, 2013 — After Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed an emergency manager who will have broad powers over Detroit's finances earlier this month, there has been renewed news media interest in Detroit's short-term budget problems and a new round of attempts to frame the narrative of Detroit's decline as solely a history of corruption, mismanagement, and union overreaching.

An article in the New York Times exemplifies exactly the kind of one-sided narrative of Detroit's decline that has prevented meaningful debate about the city's complex problems and their potential solutions.

An article in yesterday's New York Times ("[For Detroit, a Crisis of Bad Decisions and Crossed Fingers](#)") by Monica Davey and Mary Williams Walsh is perhaps the most high-profile example of coverage without context. The article lays out the city's grim financial situation and paints a picture of incompetent city officials who, through their poor decisions and lack of courage, brought Detroit to this place of reckoning.

Some of the details may be new, but many readers will recognize a familiar story line: "The financial crisis that has made Detroit one of the largest cities ever to face mandatory state oversight was decades in the making, a trail of missteps, of trimming too little, too late," the reporters write.

The true story of Detroit's crisis is far more complicated, as I discovered last year in the process of writing a [four-part series of articles](#) in which I attempted to situate the city's problems in historical and regional context.

I found that while the city's short-term financial situation is dire indeed, that problem is in large part the result of long-term structural problems for which Detroit's suburbs, the state of Michigan, and the federal government share responsibility.

I also found that the "solutions" that have been peddled by city and state officials alike routinely ignore these long-term structural problems, such as population loss and segregation.

Were that context considered, a different set of possible solutions would immediately emerge. As it turns out, there are plenty of observers who are anxious to talk about the possibilities of tax-base sharing between Detroit and its suburbs, regional cooperation on services like transportation and health care, and long-term planning that would imagine new uses for the hundreds of square miles of abandoned land in the city.

But doing so would require co-author Mary Williams Walsh — [a reporter who apparently never met a public pension plan that she didn't think was too generous](#) — diverge from her usual morality tale. Thus, for example, protections against renegeing on promises to city workers are presented as a problem:

The cost of the retirees' pensions also grew because of an inflation-protection feature that compounds every year. Detroit cannot renege on paying the benefits, at least outside of bankruptcy, because the State Constitution makes it unlawful to reduce pensions after public workers earn them.

As it happens, the unfunded pension liability “news peg” is eight years old, but that didn't stop the reporters from focusing on it. Regionally based structural problems, by contrast, were consigned to a single paragraph in the article (“Some factors were out of the city's control”), reinforcing the view that the only possible way forward for Detroit involves further cuts to services, the stripping of pensions, or possibly even bankruptcy.

None of this is to say that Detroit's management hasn't been strikingly poor, and most Detroit officials, fearful of relinquishing decision-making power, have had just as one-sided a view of the causes of the city's problems (assigning all of the blame to suburban, state, and federal policies) as do their suburban counterparts (“Why should I pay for the city's mistakes?” asked L. Brooks Patterson, the executive of Oakland County, a wealthy suburb that borders Detroit to the north, when I interviewed him for my articles).

Sadly, the Times story exemplifies exactly this latter kind of one-sided thinking. But in truth, Detroit needs much more than better management. It needs large-scale, purposeful investment. It needs new channels of communication between officials in the city, the suburbs, and the state house. Most of all, it needs a vision of the city that does not begin with the assumption that its residents must be forced to endure poor schools, dangerous neighborhoods, and a lack of basic services indefinitely.

That's a story the Times might have tried to tell.

This content originally appeared at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/node/1816>