



Flint mayoral candidates eye neighborhood downsizing, wary of details

Says one candidate on shrinkage plan that's attracting national attention: 'You re-pattern the city, you don't shrink it.'

By Chris Killian 6/19/09 2:14 PM

Both candidates seeking Flint's top political job agree that something needs to be done to stem the tide of blight that seems to be increasing as the economy continues to falter.

To what degree the city, once Michigan's second largest, should be involved is where they disagree.



Downtown Flint (Photo by Karpov the Wrecked Train via Flickr)

Businessman Dayne Walling and former state representative and current Genesee County Commissioner Brenda Clack, both Democrats, are facing off against one another in an August election to replace former Mayor Don Williamson, who resigned in February after five years in office.

The thousands of empty houses that are spread out over more than 30 neighborhoods in the city are a sad testament to the economic realities that exist in Flint, which is struggling with a \$15-million budget deficit and trying to avoid a state takeover of its finances.

Genesee County's land bank currently controls about 4,000 properties, 3,500 of which are inside the city limits. Depending on the level of funding available, about 100 abandoned properties are demolished a year, said Dan Kildee, the county's treasurer and nephew of Democratic U.S. Rep. Dale Kildee, who represents the area.

Recently, the idea of "shrinking" the city by demolishing abandoned properties and consolidating neighborhoods has been discussed, garnering national media attention. Proponents argue that the strategy would eliminate blight, create green space and provide space for redevelopment.

The idea of planned shrinkage became a viable concept in Michigan a few years ago, when the state changed its laws regarding properties foreclosed for delinquent taxes. Prior to that, abandoned buildings and homes tended to be tied up in the courts, adding to blight.

Now they're being snatched-up by county land banks, which have a powerful tool to change the face of communities.

"The idea is to reshape the city so we have a small collection of sustainable neighborhoods with open green space," said Kildee, a Flint native and chief executive of the local land bank. "We have a concept, now we need a design."

The land bank "has the potential to be a very significant tool in the redevelopment of the city of Flint," said Walling, who narrowly lost to Williamson in 2007. "There are thousands of houses that need to be demolished but we need to make sure that residents have every opportunity to weigh-in on the process. Every neighborhood needs a unique solution."

Clack called the shrinkage push a "political bullet," adding that she is worried about residents who are low income or senior citizens living in properties that the land bank might have its eyes on being left out of a place to live.

"I don't believe in removing people," she said. "In some areas there are one or two abandoned homes on a block that need to be torn down, but we don't even have the money to tear them down."

Clack said that the shrinkage idea would "not be a top priority" for her if she was elected mayor.

"You re-pattern the city, you don't shrink it," she said.

Both candidates said they were concerned over the current lack of specifics regarding the shrinkage push.

“It’s partly controversial because not that much is known about it,” Walling said. “Right now it seems more like a catch phrase, not a plan.”

Said Clack: “What do residents think about this? We need to get more people involved in this process.”

The city last updated its master plan in 1965, when about 200,000 people lived there and General Motors was thriving. City planners then estimated that Flint could grow to 350,000 residents.

Flint, currently the fourth-largest city in the state, has no city planner. Both Walling and Clack said that would have one in their administration.

According to 2007 U.S. Census data, the city’s population has slipped to 114,662. Residents continue to leave the city in search of job opportunities. Nearly one-third of current residents live in poverty.

Property abandonment in Flint is so bad that interim Mayor Michael Brown made a suggestion in March that the city could shut down whole sections of neighborhoods, officially abandoning them and cutting off police and fire service.

That idea had “racial overtones,” Walling said, and only served to inject a controversial tone into the idea of shrinking the city in order to make it more viable.

“People here want to live in healthy, stable, integrated neighborhoods,” he said.

Kildee acknowledged that the debate over shrinking the city would continue for years.

“It’s an ongoing process,” he said.

Editor’s note: An earlier version of this story misstated the relationship between U.S. Rep. Dale Kildee and Genesee County Treasurer Dan Kildee, who is the congressman’s nephew. The story has been updated to correct the record.