



Youngstown, Ohio mayor to bring ideas for smaller city to Flint

Posted by Ron Fonger | The Flint Journal April 15, 2009 11:13AM

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FLINT, Michigan -- The city was a boom town with a history of heavy industry, violent face-offs between workers and companies and a reputation for rough politics.

No, not Flint, but Youngstown, Ohio, the city that some here are pointing to as a how-to model for shrinking the size of a city that was built for far more people than live there now.

Flint Journal extras About Youngstown, Ohio

- Incorporated in 1867, 12 years after the city of Flint.
- Population estimated at 81,520 in 2006, about 30,000 fewer than Flint.
- There were about 37,000 housing units in the city in 2000, compared with more than 55,000 in Flint.
- During World War I, steel mills turned the area into a boom town, and the city's population swelled so rapidly that there was a housing shortage. Population peaked in 1930 at just more than 170,000 residents.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Ohio History Central

"The goal was to stop looking at the city as it had been designed, but for a future that realistically was with 80,000 to 85,000 people," said Youngstown Mayor Jay Williams, who likely will visit Flint this year to talk about his city.

Charismatic, young and a political independent, Williams is trying to reinvent the old steel town by conserving resources and saving his healthiest neighborhoods with an eye toward eventually shutting down those that are not.

James London, a 46-year-old transplant to Youngstown, said he has become a believer, even though there are doubters.

"A lot of residents don't understand how much it costs to do upkeep on an entire street even if there's just one home there," said London, a block watch captain.

"There (will be) casualties of war. If I was (on a decommissioned street), I'd be a little upset, too, but we have to worry about the city as a whole."

The idea of a smaller Flint seems to be picking up steam here -- first broached by temporary Mayor Michael Brown just last month -- and generally endorsed by Genesee County Land Bank Chairman Daniel Kildee soon after.

Kildee's Land Bank this month gained 1,600 more parcels of land, most of it in Flint, as owners increasingly let the government have their property instead of paying the taxes due on it.

Shrinking advocates say the city is simply too large for the number of people who are still here.

Kildee said he wants Williams to visit to talk about Youngstown's effort to shrink the size by targeting demolitions and investing only in streets and public services in stable neighborhoods.

Flint's population has dropped from a high of nearly 200,000 in the 1960s to an estimated 120,000 in 2003. A 2007 government study projected that the city will lose another 10 percent of its population by 2035.

Youngstown has been hit even harder by population losses over a longer period of time.

"Flint is a little larger, but there are some uncanny similarities," said Williams, the first black mayor of Youngstown and the first candidate elected there on an independent ticket in more than 80 years.

Williams campaigned on his idea to create a master plan for the city and a vow to restructure it into a smaller, more livable city.

"There are cities of 70,000 or 80,000 people that are great places to live," Williams said. "(But this) city has an infrastructure that would support three times what's here now."

Kildee said the idea is "hard medicine for people to accept," but said the question "is not if we are going to get smaller but (whether) we (are) going to do it in a destructive manner."

Phil Kidd, 29, a community organizer in Youngstown, said city residents have come to believe in the idea of living in a smaller city that works better, even if the notion remains a long-term prospect.

Many Youngstown residents have day-to-day worries about jobs and the economy and haven't yet fully grasped the idea that some neighborhoods won't exist in the future.

Kidd said a core group has been involved in the process of developing a long-term master plan, noting that about 1,500 attended a meeting in which a new master plan was unveiled.

Williams said there's increasing acceptance of the idea that the city could be organized more efficiently over a long period of time.

"We have a city built for 200,000. We have 70,000 people, and they are all spread out," he said. "I think there's an understanding that we can't keep investing where you have only a handful of people."

"That scatter-shot approach is only going to lead to more disinvestment in the city."

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