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The Odd Challenge for Detroit Planners

By MONICA DAVEY

DETROIT — When Marja M. Winters was studying urban planning in graduate school, she learned the art and science of helping cities grow.

Now Ms. Winters, a native of Detroit and the deputy director of the city's planning and development department, finds herself in an utterly unexpected role, one that no school would have thought to prepare her for: she is sorting out how to help her hometown shrink, by working through difficult decisions that will determine which neighborhoods can be saved and which cannot.

"It was always this notion that the population of the world continues to grow, and more and more people want to live in cities," Ms. Winters, 33, said about her courses at the University of Michigan. "The reality is very different. Who knew?"

Puzzling through the best way to downsize a city it is not unheard of (it has been considered in Youngstown, Ohio, and Flint, Mich. and even, decades ago, in New York). And Mayor Dave Bing has made it a priority to deal with Detroit's fast-sinking population and crumbling infrastructure by steering those who remain into fewer neighborhoods, rather than leaving them scattered throughout the 139-square-mile city, whose boundaries made more sense when twice as many people lived here 40 years ago.

Actually carrying out such an effort, particularly in a city as vast as Detroit, is like solving a complicated set of interwoven puzzles, as Ms. Winters has discovered over many long days and some nights poring over thousands of pages of maps and statistics in her 23rd-floor downtown office.

How to reconfigure roads, bus lines, police districts? How to encourage people — there is no power of eminent domain to force them — to move out of the worst neighborhoods and into better ones?

Later this month, a team that includes Ms. Winters is expected to present a proposed — and certain to be highly controversial — map to guide investment in each of the city's neighborhoods. A final plan for a remade city is expected by year's end.

"The biggest misconception is that we don't have to change," said Mr. Bing, who was elected in 2009 and describes his city as a place that is "hurting" and "sick."

"The biggest problems are those people who are on the outskirts more than anything else, where neighborhoods have gone down to a point where it makes no sense to reinvest," he said. "People will say, 'Well, why not me?' And I'm saying, we don't have the money to do that."

Detroit is already shrinking on its own, of course. Recent census figures show the city, once the nation's fourth largest, lost a quarter of its population in the last decade alone, leaving it with fewer than 714,000 people.

But the losses have been spread around the city, meaning that vacant, dilapidated homes and empty lots speckle Detroit's neighborhoods, rather than cropping up in consolidated, convenient chunks on the city edges, leaving a more vibrant core. In fact, some of the city's best-kept neighborhoods are on its outer edges, while the troubled spots are closer to downtown.

And so, a contingent of private consultants and city officials like Ms. Winters have taken part in one of the deepest mile-by-mile analyses of Detroit in memory, tracking population densities, foreclosed homes, disease, parks, roads, water lines, sewer lines, bus routes, publicly owned lands, and on and on.

Among the dismal findings: more than 100,000 parcels, private and public, are vacant; and only 38 percent of Detroiters work in the city.

The goal is to identify the strongest, most viable neighborhoods, which would receive extra attention and help from the city. The residents of some of the weakest, emptiest neighborhoods would be encouraged to move into them.

It will be a difficult sell for people like Luther Gordon, whose home on the east side of the city sits across from an empty house that burned down a few nights ago and a vacant lot on a block with many vacant lots.

"I'm going to stay right here," said Mr. Gordon, 54, about the possibility that his neighborhood of more than two decades might be deemed too far gone to save. "I don't plan to go anywhere but in the ground."

Rumors are winding through neighborhoods. Chief among them is that the worst neighborhoods will actually be closed, with the power turned off and buildings bulldozed. The true intent, Ms. Winters said, is far more nuanced, and slower-moving.

Though the city will offer some kind of incentives for people in miserable neighborhoods to move, no neighborhood will be simply shut down, she said. A place deemed not worthy of new residential investment might see subtle shifts: services like garbage pickup, she said, could slow to every 12 days from once a week.

“We want to reduce the city’s cost of delivering services, but we also want to support a baseline quality of life — the key is how do we balance that out?” Ms. Winters said.

The ultimate plan for those neighborhoods — and the ultimate cost of consolidating them — is uncertain; some might become home to new industry, and some might be used to fill temporary needs, or for urban gardens and green space.

In more well-to-do neighborhoods, like Indian Village, where mansions fill the blocks and lawn-service crews were out in force last week, the idea of shrinking the city’s neighborhoods sounds appealing to many residents.

“When I go in some of the neighborhoods now, I have tears in my face, I just can’t believe what I see,” said Rukayya Ahsan-McTier, who was walking briskly for exercise in Indian Village, while clasping a golf club in one hand for protection from stray dogs or, as she said, any other trouble that might come her way.

Still, even Ms. Ahsan-McTier had lingering doubts about how the city’s plan would work. How would the city persuade people to move from less expensive neighborhoods to more expensive ones? And would the new neighbors mesh?

Elsewhere, others had their own worries: Would this simply amount to another chapter of “urban renewal” in which the poorest, least educated and unluckiest would be forced to move?

And what exactly would become of the neighborhoods with diminished services, likely to be places already plagued in some cases by what residents described as new, audacious brands of crimes? (Stores in some neighborhoods here have taken to placing cement blocks outside their glass entryways, residents said, to prevent thieves from crashing their cars through the doors for break-ins.)

“I’m hopeful, but I don’t know what it all would mean,” said Bayard Kurth, a screen printer from the West Village, another established neighborhood. “Big greenbelts in the city? Unmonitored places where people do whatever they want? All-day parties there?”

For their part, city officials say the police and firefighters will always serve all Detroit neighborhoods — even ones where only a few people may be left.

Mr. Bing’s hope is that a “core group” of neighborhoods connected to downtown, and to the city’s spine, Woodward Avenue, will remain, and that the master plan will ultimately help end the exodus of Detroiters.

Lately, Ms. Winters has spent hours meeting with large groups to talk about their concerns, their questions and their doubts over the plans. Last week, clergy members quizzed her; before that, older residents. Later this month, she is to meet with youths, artists, environmental advocates and entrepreneurs.

“It’s all very hard,” Ms. Winters said the other day. “There’s so much weighing on it, we just can’t afford to mess up. We’ve got to get this right, right now.”

Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/06/us/06detroit.html>