

Thompson: Inclusion crucial to Detroit's comeback

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Detroit's comeback narrative for the most part has been a conversation dominated by the leaders of foundations actively involved in the city's revitalization efforts as well as CEOs and other business leaders engaged in investments in and around downtown and Midtown.

Almost on a monthly basis there are announcements about new investments meant to enhance ongoing activities in the city's business district.

But leaders of some local organizations deeply engaged in the trenches — helping to address issues of social equity, poverty and dire unemployment in the city — want a broader conversation and more focus on core issues facing Detroit's comeback.

"I think the foundation leaders have been the primary-thought leaders in helping to revitalize the city. But where it really counts, in the neighborhoods, we have been really slow in bringing them back," said Alice Thompson, CEO of Black Family Development, a social service agency that caters to 14,000 families and children each year. "I know we talk about the developments on Seven Mile and Livernois area, but that is just a small pocket of the entire city. We have to make greater gains in our neighborhoods because the core of our families live in these neighborhoods."

She said Detroit is facing challenges in coping with a knowledge-based economy from one that centered on manufacturing.

"Part of the issue is trying to get jobs matched with Detroit's skill sets, and it is difficult to get these jobs matched," Thompson said. "We have not been able to put people into jobs because our education system for the last 20 years on the metric scale has been crumbling. People have to be able to pass basic mental tests, and the system designed in our education system has failed the children in Detroit."

Education, according to Thompson, remains a major quality-of-life issue that has to be tackled to enable Detroiters to get the jobs and improve their living conditions in the city.

She said while it is justified to make the case that the city is coming back, “there is still great disparity because we see a lot of crumbling neighborhoods all around us. We have to do a lot more than we’ve done.”

Chad Audi, CEO of the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries, agrees. “I want the comeback of working parents who are homeless and hurting with their precious kids. I want the comeback of women and children who have been abused and left despondent,” Audi said. “They too need rebuilding and regenerating. As you know, the strength of a city is in its people — everyone in it. People — healthy, high-minded, hardworking and happy people — make a beautiful city.”

Audi, whose group provides services daily to 2,200 veterans, women, men and children and serve more than 4,000 meals a day, said the city’s economic drivers should bear in mind “that everyone is not equal; that the needs of various individuals, families and groups that make up the city are different; that every life — young or old, rich or poor, educated or less educated — really matters in the community.”

He added, “I believe it is appropriate to give better funding to those organizations that make a real difference in the lives of metro Detroiters, especially the vulnerable, abused and neglected.”

David Sampson, the CEO of Mariner’s Inn, a rehabilitation center for men suffering from substance abuse that provides treatment to 152 men on a daily basis, says groups like his should be part of the conversations in shaping the city’s future because they deal with communities that need “a sense of hope” and a place to call home in Detroit.

“It would help to have a portion of the resources identified for the resurging comeback, dedicated for people with more challenging circumstances,” Sampson said. “I believe that their voice counts and would add to the discussion (or plans) for revitalization that includes everyone. When people are employed, have a sense of hope and have a place to call their own, they are more likely to be champions of change rather than agitators of revitalization.”

He said, “All voices count and that everyone matters in the revitalization of Detroit. The more people you include, the greater the buy-in and the more empowered people feel when it comes to supporting, as well as defending decisions that are made that impact the community.”

Thompson, of Black Family Development, said the comeback for all neighborhoods would “require tremendous resources and investment.”

Audi concluded, "Nobody revels in stagnation. Even those who have fallen on hard times desire to move forward, to succeed and keep succeeding. It is good that our city is rebuilding but I also want the comeback of families who lost their jobs and consequently their cars and homes, as well as veterans who served our country well overseas but are now jobless and homeless right here in Detroit."