



Jack Lessenberry

Time is Running Out for Detroit

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DETROIT — Glenda Price is exactly the type of person Detroit needs. A Philadelphia native and a former scientist turned university administrator, she arrived in 1998 to become the president of Marygrove College, a small, struggling liberal arts school. Within a few years, she had turned the school's bleak finances around, partly by setting up an innovative distance learning program.

When she retired six years ago, she thought about returning to Philadelphia, or Atlanta, where she had worked for many years. "But I realized that everything I was looking for in life was right here," she told me. She is now running the Detroit Public Schools Foundation, raising money to help the state's most troubled school district. Earlier this year, she was appointed to the Financial Advisory Board designed to help the struggling City of Detroit avoid a state takeover or federal bankruptcy court.

Price is a natural optimist, who, at 73 says, "I see so many wonderful opportunities ahead of us — that's the way I look at life." But this week, even she was fed up with the antics of the politicians running—or failing to run—Michigan's largest city, which now seems more certain than ever to topple into bankruptcy. "Dismay is far too mild a term," she said, choosing her words carefully. Others used tones far more harsh. If anyone had any lingering doubts that the "consent agreement" designed to save Detroit isn't working, they should be effectively laid to rest.

Last week, with the city just weeks from running out of cash, Mayor Dave Bing called an emergency meeting of City Council to try to get them to approve a consulting contract with a law firm. Under the terms of the consent agreement, such a contract is required before the state releases \$30 million from a special bond issue designed to keep the city functioning. However, the mayor didn't show up for his own meeting, citing a "family matter." The council needed to approve the \$300,000 contract before the state will release \$30 million Detroit needs to meet its mid-December payroll.

Despite the city's desperate state, it was quickly clear that the Council was set to vote against the deal. Some said it was because they don't like that the law firm, Miller Canfield, had a hand in writing the consent agreement itself, as well as the tough emergency manager law voters narrowly repealed on Election Day.

Maybe. But the bigger reason may be that many Council members loathe Mayor Bing. For his part, the Mayor openly holds the Council in contempt, and seems to have virtually abandoned attempts to work with it. In fairness, it is hard to see how anyone could avoid being exasperated with most of the nine members, who seem to neither grasp economic reality or to care about it. Mostly, a majority of the Council seem determined to block anything, even when it is clearly in the city's best interests.

When the state offered to take over Belle Isle and run it as a state park, the Council indignantly rejected it, even though the city doesn't have the funds to do even minimal maintenance on what was once one of the city's most beautiful jewels. The Council also refused a contract to reform the troubled Water and Sewerage Department, even though a previous director just pleaded guilty to corruption charges. Last week, they refused to let a philanthropic financier named John Hantz buy vacant land and beautify Detroit's rundown east side with a tree farm. Nor do Council members seem worried about the long term. They seemed to have little concern that city workers might not get paid if they didn't approve the law firm contract.

However, in one more Three Stooges moment, the vote was never taken. Why? Well, the city law department suddenly announced that the meeting was apparently illegal under Michigan's Open Meetings Act! Seems they didn't post required notices of the meeting within the government center until after the building was closed for Thanksgiving. The department is led by Krystal Crittendon, the corporation counsel who, unlike most lawyers in her position, ignores the mayor's wishes and who has spent much of time filing lawsuits trying to overturn the consent agreement, which she thinks is illegal.

The mayor has tried repeatedly to fire her, but that also has been blocked by the Council.

"The biggest mystery surrounding Detroit's imminent financial collapse isn't whether or how exactly it will go bankrupt," Detroit News business columnist Daniel Howes wrote this week. "It's when, and how steep a price will be paid by city residents, employees, retirees and business leaders."

No city Detroit's size has ever gone through federal bankruptcy, and analysts say the experience could easily have negative effects statewide, from Michigan's image to its bond rating. There is, however, still a way bankruptcy might be avoided: A new emergency manager law. Last spring, at least one member of the financial advisory board, former Wayne State University President Irvin Reid, thought the governor should have moved then to impose a powerful emergency manager on Detroit. Glenda Price favored the consent agreement "as a transitional phase." But now, she'd be ready for an emergency manager, "if we can get legislation that would give she or he the needed authority."

What's clear to everyone is that Detroit can't go on very much longer, and that whatever happens will affect everyone in Michigan, possibly in more ways than anyone now knows.

Veteran journalist and national Emmy Award winner Jack Lessenberry teaches at Wayne State University, serves as Michigan Radio's senior political analyst and writes regularly for several publications. He also serves as *The Toledo Blade's* writing coach and ombudsman and is host of the weekly television show *Deadline Now* on WGTE-TV in Toledo.