

# *State of the 'Hood*

## **2009**



**“Creating a culture of accountability – it takes a village”**

**Community Builders Luncheon, May 20, 2009  
Detroit Community Initiative, Inc.**

# **History of the State of the ‘Hood**

**We publish this document to lift the voices of Detroit neighborhoods. Over the past 14 years, we have encouraged our city, county, state, and federal administrations, legislators, courts and residents to improve the process of neighborhood “vitalization”. In these present economic times, we are fighting for sustainability. We must be willing to make tough choices.**

**The history of past reports reflects upon the poor conditions of many Detroit neighborhoods. Resident complaints often reflect upon governmental services that are slow to respond to the needs of residents and local businesses. Due to the continual downturn in the economy, we must live and work with less. Public safety is threatened and no one is immune from the hardships.**

**We believe that our experiences and activist spirits are critical to restoring Detroit’s neighborhoods. Clean and Safe initiatives are routine. Thousands of us answer the call even as available resources are reduced.**

**The challenges long endured by urban communities are now visible in the adjoining suburbs. Dwindling resources are forcing the region and the state to cut back on essential services. These tough times can be used as catalysts for change, opportunities for reshaping neighborhoods and to revisit the way Detroiters and neighboring cities view one another. The realities of this global economic hardship do not discriminate. We’re in this mess together and only together can we overcome these challenges.**

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**We thank our civic leadership, community partners and volunteers for continuing their efforts to provide safety nets for the most vulnerable. Their leadership is tested on a daily basis by the poor economy.**

**We ask everyone to help us build a culture of accountability. We seek neighbors who are neighborly, folks to maintain their property, parents to raise their children responsibly, and public servants who are responsible stewards of our resources. All of us can do better!**

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# State of the 'Hood 2009

Our last report issued in 2007 stressed that we needed to get “Back to Basics”. Throughout the City of Detroit, we came together to find common ground that would help us set a path for neighborhood revitalization. Today, we witness challenges and face hardships not seen before, by most of us. Even so, Detroiters have been strengthened by adversity over the years. Are we ready to use our strengths, hopes and faith to set a new course for our city and region?

Since 2007, we have seen local foundations pool resources to help us build and sustain our neighborhoods while developing programming for lasting success. Initiatives were launched to target neighborhoods with dense youth populations. Whether it's educational or a wealth building focus, these funding streams are keeping a bad situation from becoming a catastrophe. However, these programs will not last forever. We applaud these foundations for finding the courage to invest in us at higher than normal levels though they are losing value in their financial holdings.

Adding to the pain of these economic times, many neighborhoods are not recipients of this targeted funding. Many of those residents face even greater hardships. How can we meet the needs of so many? Never forget that Detroit has been in a recession for years. Only recently are others experiencing the pain we have been living, and in many cases the economic free fall has been harder. Detroit neighborhoods and businesses are not alone in this struggle.

We must embrace the opportunity to leverage available resources and restructure our ways of doing business at all levels. Hard times motivate us to be more responsible. We change our priorities. We seek partnerships. We demand more accountability from our elected officials, but have we looked at every aspect of our lives? Each and everyone one of us can improve ourselves and in turn become more accountable to society. We can take a daily inventory and see if there are ways we can improve ourselves, our community, or society. Sometimes the simplest of changes can set us on a path of success. Sometimes we just have to take baby steps.

Recent Detroit voter apathy can be attributed to our failure to hold elected officials accountable. We become jaded. Did you vote? What will you do in August and November? Will you stay home and moan that things will never change? Will you go to the polls and vote for “name recognition” candidates or will you get to know the candidates and vote with confidence? Voters are accountable to all who fought and died for us to have the right to vote. We are accountable to our children and to our community.

President Barack Obama's administration seeks to build partnerships across America and across the world. He recognizes the need for collaboration and sharing of resources during these tough economic times. President Obama has set a path for government that forces accountability to Americans. A path that sends a message to all of us who elected him to the Office of President that he will be a responsible steward of our nation's resources and talents. We should expect the same courtesy at the local level and even from our neighbors.

### **A culture of accountability, what can we do?**

- Demand an improved educational system. The Obama Administration will need our support to fund a change in the current culture in Detroit Public Schools. We are on a path of correction. Let's embrace this effort.
- Elect strong leadership with the ability and potential to serve us.
- Keep our property clean and help our neighbors to do the same
- Join a neighborhood watch or block club
- If your neighbors are not sending their kids to school, report them! You may be the only hope the children have to succeed in life.
- Share resource information with your neighbors and friends.
- Report crime or suspicious activity in your neighborhood.
- Demand better goods and services from our local businesses
- Spend more of your disposable income in Detroit and stop subsidizing the disinvestment in our neighborhoods.
- Encourage our youth to attend school and non-school activities.
- Report street light outages, dumping, or abandoned homes and follow up with the city for remediation of these threats.
- Seek an improvement in government service delivery at all levels.
- Encourage local businesses to hire community youth and support the neighborhoods in which they do business.
- Whether it's the household budget or a multi-million dollar project, we must seek to maximize the potential impact of the dollar. Seek value and expect accountability from those who control the purse strings.

What simple suggestions do you have? What has worked for you in the past?  
How can you improve yourself?

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As we have talked about accountability. We must recognize that all of us are forced to do more with less. Whether it's stretching the food budget or dialing down the thermostat, we need to become better managers of our lives and in turn create a better future for our neighborhoods.

The City of Detroit, Wayne County, State of Michigan and Federal government are accountable to us. All levels of government are seeking ways to leverage the billions of dollars in stimulus funds that are designed to be a catalyst for economic growth. Reduced tax revenues have forced cutbacks in many areas resulting in a good portion of the stimulus funds to be used to bridge budget deficits. Yet billions will flow into programs and services that provide an opportunity for government and residents to position our neighborhoods for sustained growth in the long-term. Demand equity and sound management in the distribution of these funds.

Our neighborhoods must demand responsible distribution of the funds in order to achieve maximum benefit. Is it time for Detroit to abandon primarily vacant residential areas of Detroit and focus on strengthening sustainable communities? Do we shift more funding to support family wealth building and educational programs? How do we integrate our “returning citizens” into our communities in a safe and responsible manner?

Do we elect our city council members from a district instead of at-large? Have you considered that city council elections from districts is more compatible with a weak form of Mayoral government complemented by a City Manager?

In order to reposition Detroit and its neighborhoods for success we must hold ourselves accountable. All of us want Detroit to prosper. Therefore, we must be willing to get involved, to become knowledgeable, and to change. Change is never easy, but without change we limit our growth and potential as individuals and a Detroit society.

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Let’s re-visit some neighborhood concerns. Many of these problems will get worse as budget cutbacks continue to reduce city service delivery. We encourage residents and businesses to seek resources that are available from the county and state levels of government. We have been able to obtain support from Wayne County for the removal of trash dumping, discarded tires and even to shut down drug houses. These blended resources allow us to maximize our clean and safe activities in the neighborhoods. What other resources are available?

**Public Safety (Fire/Police)** - For years, our police and fire departments have seen drastic cuts in resources. The recent expansion of mini-stations in Detroit may help foster a better community policing team with area residents. Crime and Fire prevention workshops are pro-active and they can help to reduce crimes, arsons, and accidental fires. Is there funding to support a continual pro-active approach to public safety?

The lack of training, equipment, and manpower are obvious barriers to crime reduction. Hopefully, the new administration will be able to direct a reasonable portion of stimulus or other federal funding into public safety budgets.

**While we need an improvement in response time to crime reports, we need more funding support for community policing officers and programming. Public Safety is a high priority for Detroiters. Residents should hold their elected officials accountable for placing sufficient funding into the budget for public safety. This year is an election year for Detroiters. Ask candidates for a plan, not sound bites!**

**Code Enforcement and Education** – Detroiters have seen the effectiveness of the new Department of Administrative Hearings (DAH). Complaints continue about the fines and remediation costs associated with the infraction. Often, violators feel like they are being victimized twice. Someone dumps trash on their property and then they have to pay a fine and remove the violation. Overall, the process is working to force folks to maintain their property. Many violators are responsible for creating the violations, but the system needs to improve.

**There continues to be a lack of inspectors to follow up on complaints. Also, a backlog in violation processing is evident. Resources are needed to address both issues. Community code education is insufficient from the government. Training and Educational resources should be developed for greater outreach. PSA's could be utilized on TV and Radio. Let's raise the consciousness of all Detroiters and guests. Let's think "Clean & Safe".**

**Vacant Buildings and Land Reclamation** - Detroit community development corporations, private developers and city officials are creating strategies to reclaim vacant land in Detroit. Our city's infrastructure of city service delivery and land use are remnants of a bygone era. We must adjust to the market and needs of strong existing residential and business communities.

The City of Detroit has improved its process to demolish dangerous buildings but many more are filling the pipeline. Recent GIS mapping efforts have shown that once stable communities are experiencing vacancies. Some of these units are home to squatters and dope dealers. Vacant land becomes targets for dumping.

Vacant commercial units are also a threat to public safety. Once proud neighborhoods are now littered with commercial buildings falling down in front of them, or stripped by thieves in broad daylight.

**Land reclamation strategic planning is underway. Consideration must be given to reuse of vacant land both residential and commercial. Can we develop a common green space theme that can be replicated across the city's major arteries? Will the state and county help remediate contaminated sites in their land bank inventory? Effective reuse of vacant land can make a tremendous impact on the quality of life for Detroiters.**

**Traffic Safety** - In 2004 residents in northeast Detroit, selected traffic safety as the number one target for remediation. This remains a top issue for 2009. For several years, groups and residents participating in the Northeast Village Collaborative have consistently asked for help on this safety issue. The members identified problems and recommended solutions or action steps. Some of these issues listed below could reflect the concerns within many Detroit neighborhoods. It is also a concern in suburban communities.

### **Vehicular Issues**

- Excessive speed
- Failure to stop at traffic lights
- Failure to stop at stop signs
- Uninsured or unlicensed drivers
- Defective equipment
- Improper parking or blocking through lanes
- Loud noise (sound systems, mufflers)
- Distracted driving
- Driving under the influence
- Obstructed view caused by illegal signs

### **Pedestrian Issues**

- Jaywalking through busy traffic lanes
- Walking in streets instead of sidewalks
- Playing basketball in the streets obstructing traffic
- Walking against traffic lights
- Illegal business signs obstructing pedestrian right of way

**We suggest an increase in school based traffic safety education, radio/TV PSA's, and billboards. The traffic safety problems are getting worse. More drivers appear to be running red lights and speeding. Often we witness these violations occur in close proximity to passing police units. Such action is a total slap in the face to our society and these individuals should be held accountable.**

**Licensing and Inspections of local businesses** – Neighborhood groups have requested better inspection of used tire stores. Tire dumping continues to be a problem. Most of these stores are not properly securing used tires or disposing tires in required landfills. We ask the State of Michigan and County of Wayne to partner with the City of Detroit to fix this long-term problem. If special licensing and inspections are required, so be it. Which government agency will take the lead on this danger?

The illegal sign subject is a perennial problem for northeast Detroit residents. Without a doubt, it is a citywide problem. The uniqueness of the illegal signage issue is that it crosses many paths. The primary complaints were signs illegally placed on utility poles. Other signage concerns are A Frames and Portable Electric signs placed on berms and sidewalks. Sidewalk signs also reduce traffic visibility. Enforcement is at a minimum.

Used car lots and other businesses often use city sidewalks and berms to sell their goods. This poses a disadvantage to comparable retailers who obey city laws. It also creates a traffic safety hazard. Most of these lot managers refuse to comply with the law and several have expressed that point of view to us.

**In cooperation with the business licensing unit, all Detroit businesses and commercial buildings should be visited at least every two years. Local residences used for commercial purpose beyond zoning designation should be closed immediately. Fines and asset forfeitures will provide revenue to support enforcement and inspection activities.**

**Public Lighting** – Residents have made light outages their number one complaint to the city. Besides the obvious pockets of light outages, many neighborhoods are faced with singular light outages that create unsafe living and driving conditions. Sporadic light outages in some neighborhoods still frustrate residents.

**Beyond resident complaints, the city must improve its process for monitoring these outages. It is inexcusable and dangerous for lights to be out of service for any extended period of time. The poor lighting diminishes traffic safety, contributes to crime and fosters prostitution, gang and drug activity. Public Lighting is one of the most difficult departments to achieve satisfactory service delivery.**

**Recreation** – Considering the lack of resources, the recreation department has done a good job in keeping the grass cut at local playfields. However, city attempts to abandon playfields, or encourage neighborhoods groups to accept the maintenance and liability needs to be revisited.

**Family leadership is essential to neighborhood stability. Parents are encouraged to seek out programs and activities available in many neighborhoods. Residents need to be more responsible in their use of facilities. A simple suggestion is to monitor your children and clean up after a family picnic. The city must stop sacrificing our children's future through cutbacks in recreational services. Who's accountable? All of us are part of the problem but we can also be the solution.**

### **Closing Comments**

**While we may assume it's safer to sit back and let others worry about neighborhood challenges, apathy is not the answer. Predators are seeking ways to take the little we have left.**

**Scrap metal thieves and house strippers will pillage a vacant house at the first opportunity. Drug dealers will set up shop on your block and bring all the social ills with them including break-ins, robberies and prostitution. The owners of these properties must be held accountable.**

**Children wandering the streets or staying at home during school hours is your problem too. Their parents must be held accountable.**

**Elected officials who seek to make fortunes in public office instead of serving the public must be held accountable. Let our candidates be guided by vision, talent and passion, not paycheck.**

**Let's agree to disagree on some points but can we agree to create a culture of improved accountability at all levels of society and all walks of life? Let this philosophy take root from the teacher, to the preacher, and the community outreach. Let it be done for Detroit's future!**