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Magazine

April 2017



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Commentary *Flint's taxes: Any happy returns?*

By *Paul Rozycki*

*If you drive a car, I'll tax the street,
If you try to sit, I'll tax your seat.
If you get too cold, I'll tax the heat,
If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet.*

– **George Harrison, The Beatles, Taxman**

Like many at this time of the year, I've just hit the 'File' button on my Turbo Tax, and I've stuffed all my W2s, 1040s, 1099s, bank statements, receipts, random papers and memos back into a folder to be ignored until next year. But for all the headaches of filling out our annual 1040s for the feds, taxes (or the lack of them) may have an even greater impact on the future of Flint. It seems that mind-numbing numbers are always part of the tax system, but they are inescapable, and they are a major (maybe THE major) problem that Flint faces in the years to come. In the long run, they will be more important than the latest city hall conflict between the mayor and the council, the most recent recall attempts, and perhaps even more important than the Flint water crisis (though that will dominate the horizon well into the future.)

For all of our frustrations with taxes, they are the price we pay for the services we expect in a civilized society. As a nation they have been the motivating force behind protests from "No taxation without representation" in the American Revolution of 1776, to the Tea Party of today. (Apparently, we don't like taxation WITH representation all that much either.) However they are collected, taxes should have one major goal. They should be adequate to fund what we expect from government, either national, state or local.

Michigan's many taxes

There is a long list of taxes that the state of Michigan collects. The Citizens Research Council of Michigan lists approximately 60 types of taxes imposed by the state and its local governments. Some of them are well known to everyone, such as the local property tax, state sales tax or the state income tax. Others are simply strange and impenetrable, such as the Hydroponics and Aquaculture Facilities Specific Tax, the Neighborhood Enterprise Zone Facilities Tax, or the Foreign Insurance Company Retaliatory

Tax. However, for most local governments, there are two major taxes that are most critical to their survival – the property tax and the income tax.

Flint's shrinking tax base

And the problem for Flint, and many similar cities, is that the revenue for those two taxes has taken a huge hit in recent years. By one recent study (MSU: Flint Fiscal Playbook: An Assessment of the Emergency Manager Years, 2011-2015), Flint has lost nearly 75% of its tax base from those two sources. Personal income has fallen from \$3.5 billion to about \$400 million from 1996 to 2013 and the value of taxable property has fallen similarly from about \$1.5 billion to about \$750 million. With numbers like those it's not surprising that Flint has been facing a decades-long series of financial emergencies, with or without the water crisis. No mayor, city council or emergency manager can be expected to work miracles and find huge, untapped sources of funds, especially when the state has cut revenue sharing to local governments over the same period of time.

While Flint has faced some of the largest losses in population, jobs and property value, it isn't alone. Recently, *Bridge Magazine* published a study showing the decline in property value of all of Michigan's counties, townships and cities. From the start of the "great recession" in 2008 until 2016 the city of Flint has seen a 63percent decline in property values. While many economic indicators have improved statewide, few areas have recovered to 2008 levels. The decline isn't unusual, the great majority of local governments saw property values plummet, but Flint had one of the greatest declines.

The picture is even more dismal than those numbers suggest. First, Flint is still facing serious legacy/retirement costs that were incurred for a city of 200,000 people, while we have less than half that today. When a city downsizes, as Flint has, the costs don't decline as quickly as the population does. Second, when property values do recover from a deep recession, (and that has happened to some

(Continued on Page 11.)

Cover: **St. Michael archangel oversees ruin and rebirth**



Photograph by Edwin D. Custer

Photo of the Month

Some young buyers find Flint houses make good homes

By Megan Ockert

Andrew Chambers, a 28-year-old studying early elementary education at UM-Flint, has a lot to celebrate. On October 1, 2016, he was finally able to move into his own downtown Flint home he bought in July.

Chambers is one of a number of young Flint home buyers combating skepticism from others and yet finding surprising benefits by taking a chance on the city.

Hoping to buy a house at an affordable price from the Genesee County Land Bank, he had taken a short-term six-month lease on an apartment near Kettering last year. And he found one – a 2,700-square-foot house on Lapeer Road, built about 1925. It’s a two-story layout with 10 rooms, including six bedrooms.

He paid less than \$10,000.

The Genesee County Land Bank is a government organization that manages tax-foreclosed properties in Genesee County. According to their website, www.thelandbank.org, they strive to put those properties back into productive use, which includes selling and renting properties, managing blight, greening, and revitalizing the neighborhoods that surround these properties.

The house did not come without needs. Chambers has repaired a leaky roof, and

sanded and refinished all the hardwood floors. He repaired large holes in the plaster and repaired drywall, painted the house inside and out, fixed electrical issues and even returned old belongings the previous owner had left behind.

“I’ve always liked the downtown area,” Chambers said. “With UM-Flint and Kettering expanding, and MSU opening a building downtown, there have been many improvements. I think it’s a great investment and as the community continues to grow and improve, the investment will pay off.”

Despite his own positivity, Chambers admitted he faced a lot of opposition for deciding to move to Fairfield Village neighborhood.

“Everyone but my father told me not to buy the house,” he said. “My family is pretty down to earth; they weren’t necessarily worried about the crime reports, but instead, the fact that the house sat vacant for many years and needs a lot of work deterred them from thinking purchasing the house was a good idea.”

Regarding the Flint water crisis, Chambers admitted the challenge has proved to be “interesting.”

“Growing up, we couldn’t drink the well water at my parents’ house, so we always had to buy water in five-gallon

jugs. I guess the bigger issue is overcoming the hype. I feel like it doesn’t matter where you go, if you tell people you live in Flint, they immediately apologize. We have our issues, but I think the downtown life offers some great events and opportunities that everyone needs to experience.”

In fact, the water crisis proved helpful when Chambers finally bought his house in July.

“It eliminated a lot of competition to buy the house I dreamed of owning for over a year. The water crisis is a horrible problem for Flint residents, but it may have contributed to my getting the house so easily and not being outbid by another investor.”

Mark Fisher, of Weichert Realtors, who works primarily in the College Cultural neighborhood, said he has not noticed a decline in sales due to the water crisis. “At this time there are about 30 percent fewer homes on the market now than there were last year, but there are buyers ready and willing to buy now as more houses come on the market.”

Fisher said every house he sells gets water tested so that buyers know the water is safe before closing on the house.

Aimee Pintoski, 26, a nurse at Genesys Regional Medical Center, bought her Flint house for \$40,000 in May 2015. “I grew

(Continued on Page 5.)

... Buyers

(Continued from Page 4.)

up in Flint, but moved away after high school. I wanted to explore other parts of the country, so I lived in both Nevada and Virginia. I decided to move back to the Flint area to be closer to my family," she said.

Pintoski said that once she knew she was back in Flint for good she decided to buy a house in the College Cultural neighborhood. She too faced some doubts from others about her decision.

"Some of my family was skeptical about my decision to buy a house in Flint, but I think their skepticism came from them worrying about me living alone in a city and the financial obligations that come with own-



Photo by Andrew Chambers

Andrew Chambers' house on Lapeer Road

ing your own home." Despite the initial opposition she faced, Pintoski felt it was important for her to return to her hometown.

"Living in different cities made me realize how much I loved and missed Flint. Some of the experiences I had while living away from Flint made me learn that Flint is what you make it. If you want to focus on the high crime rates and contaminated water, then you are going to have a miserable time here," she said.

"I came back to Flint and chose to focus on the new restaurants and bars, the expanding bike trails, the Flint Farmers' Market, art walk, and all of the positive things Flint has to offer. I invested in a house here to help Flint grow and prosper."

Pintoski admitted that after coming back to Flint, she had a new outlook on the city itself. "After being away from Flint I realized I wanted to watch the city make a comeback. I want to be a part of Flint's comeback."

In Pintoski's case, another adventure is calling her out of town. Despite her dedication to the city, Pintoski, a lover of travel, admitted it's time for her to move on. "I feel like I've gotten too comfortable living in Flint, and it's time to discover a new city," she said. "I plan on moving to Grand Rapids to focus on new opportunities with my career."

But realtor Kelsey Kerr, of Legacy Realty Professionals, said now is a great time to buy in Flint because the prices of homes are down. She said 1,095 homes were sold in Flint in 2016 and said that number is expected to grow this year.

She said current residents in Mott Park, Woodcroft and College Cultural areas are experiencing the highest appreciation and that home values are rising throughout the city.

Kerr, 23, who began her career as a realtor in 2015 stated that Flint has been one of the most watched and discussed markets since she started working with

Legacy Realty Professionals.

She recently moved into Flint's College Cultural neighborhood herself.

"The biggest question I always hear is why did I move to Flint? Non-Flint residents have a hard time hiding the judgment from

their voice when they ask it, but I never tire of answering this question," Kerr said.

"I was born here and grew up on Franklin Avenue in the College Cultural community. While my family did move while I was in high school, I found myself back in Flint for four years while completing my education at UM-Flint. When my time there was up ... I didn't want to leave. I know this is where I was meant to live."

Flint has a lot to offer its residents, Kerr said, including universities, cultural centers, races, arts programs, diverse restaurants and unique businesses. "Flint feels like home to me," she said.

Kerr is not the only one who has grown to appreciate the active downtown scene that Flint offers. "Without question I am

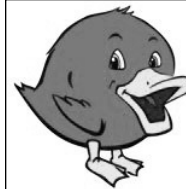
going to miss the people of Flint the most," Pintoski said. "I'll miss the small-town vibe of Flint and all that it has to offer. The bike trails, the Flint Farmers' Market and Soggy Bottom Bar are just a few places I'll miss frequenting," she said.

Pintoski said she doesn't feel like she's going away forever. "Flint will always be home, and it's only a matter of time before I come back."

Staff writer Megan Ockert can be reached at ockertma@gmail.com.

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Mott Park Blight Squad steps up to save neighborhood

By *Teddy Robertson*

On Father's Day, Sunday, June 19, NBC-25 aired a local news segment that showed a group of Mott Park residents as they cleared brush, cut dangling branches, boarded up windows and mowed overgrown grass at a vacant house in the neighborhood.

Six volunteers, including an eager 3-year-old helper named Jack, worked fast in the bright, increasingly hot, sunlight because one Mott Park resident, Bobbi Wray, had put out a call to friends asking for help to clean up a vacant house next to hers on Marquette Street.

A crew came together organized by Steven Major, Mott Park resident of seven years and reserve officer for City of Flint police. Home Depot and the neighborhood association donated materials and friends loaned tools.

When TV-25 reporter Miranda Parnell asked why, Steve just said, "We've just had enough."

The Mott Park's Blight Squad had burst onto the scene.

One abandoned house leads to others

Bobbi Wray, herself a retired reporter from what was then called TV-5 and the first female TV reporter in Michigan, recounts a backstory all too common. Sometime in 2011, her neighbors – a couple in their sixties – got underwater on their mortgage and were unable to take out a second mortgage to finance roof repairs. Finally, in desperation, they left, and the house reverted to bank ownership, a warning notice was later tacked on its storm door saying the property belonged to "M & M Mortgage Services."

Cleanup of more properties followed that first June action and the group adopted the name Blight Squad for their Facebook page. Major became its direc-

tor, the Genesee County Land Bank "Clean and Green" program and paint from a neighborhood owner of a paint store. Neighbors loaned tools and brought cases of water, leaf bags, and work gloves wherever Facebook announced the crew was working.

A rare find in the overgrowth

One day during a late August cleanup, the squad uncovered a 1945 Chevrolet coupe made in Chevy-in-the-Hole Flint. They found it under heavy brush, the paint in fair condition protected by overgrowth. Online research showed it was a Fleetline AeroSedan, one of Chevrolet's first vehicles when it returned to civilian car making. The crew has found other vehicles as well, though none so interesting.



Photo by Greg Harmon

1945 Chevy coupe unearthed by Squad

Meantime, the Mott Park Neighborhood Association worked closely with Kettering University and Tom Wyatt, project manager of "Renew the Avenue," a Department of Justice program whose Byrne Grant reduces crime by engaging the community (currently Stevenson Neighborhood, Mott Park, Sunset Village/Glendale Hills) to decrease blight. Byrne grant funds helped provide tools, board-up materials and motion-activated LED solar security lights. Kettering University has provided student workers as well.

Toward the end of the 2016, and with a dozen properties cleaned up, the Blight Squad began to decide strategically where to work. They found a target at the triangle where Perry, Woodbridge, and Joliet streets meet – a small cluster of old commercial buildings whose renovation, the squad speculated, could have a big impact.

The "Historic Business District" emerges

Online research revealed the three buildings had once been the Woodbridge Market, a Plumbers' Union, and a Pure Oil station (including building plans). Major dubbed the site the Mott Park "Historic Business District."

The middle structure, Woodbridge Market, turned out to have an owner who decided to refurbish the building himself. The buildings on each side of the old market were the Plumbers' Union (the initials "J.B. CO" embedded in its façade) and the Pure Oil building. The exterior for Pure Oil was "English Cottage" style, originally with a trademark blue roof, one of the first company attempts at a chain look for gas stations.

At present, with the exterior renovation nearly done, the neighborhood association plans to purchase the Plumbers' Union building. The Pure Oil building is slated as studio space for Mott Park resident and artist Ryan Gregory.

After the Historic Business District cleanup, the Blight Squad did small jobs, often cleaning up after illegal dumping, but with the approach of fall weather a new challenge emerged: squatters. A gruesome knifing incident occurred in late August in one squatters' house in a row of derelict structures on Chevrolet Avenue near the Flushing Road intersection. The squatters were cleared and the houses boarded up in early winter.

"Renew the Avenue" gets involved

By the end of December, ABC-12 and NBC-25 had aired four news reports about the Blight Squad's efforts. Over the winter into 2017, their work changed. The Blight Squad adopted an off-season pattern: assess now and then secure, install security lighting, and decide how to maintain.

Tom Wyatt's "Renew the Avenue" at Kettering University supplied wood for board ups, four cordless drills and the loan of a generator – essential where power has been cut. The Blight Squad could obtain security lighting, purchased in bulk and tax-free. Winter work was a combination of networking with local groups and organization's board-ups.

In early January a group of 16 people, Blight Squad members and others, met at Kettering to plan for the coming summer season. As April begins, their plans for the first large-scale spring project are underway. The target? Joliet Street, which runs from Kettering University at Dupont Street to Blair Street deep into the interior of Mott Park.

Sunday, March 26, a Blight Squad crew
(Continued on Page 7.)



Photo by Steve Major

Cummins with Mott Park target house

tor, working closely with the Mott Park Neighborhood Association. The core members drove the neighborhood, checked properties, reached out to neighborhood residents through the Mott Park neighborhood association Facebook page, and gathered leads on addresses showing evidence of squatters.

Donations came – bags and compost from

... Blight

(Continued from Page 6.)

began the cleanup of one burned out property on Joliet. Volunteers knocked down all remnants, heaved concrete blocks into the basement and loaded charred wood and debris into a 20-foot dumpster.

NBC-25 and ABC-12 stopped by to film the day's crew that included Eric Bumbalough, Steve Major and son Kenny, Tony Coleman, Bo Cummins, Joe Harmon, Bobbi Wray, Chad Schlosser, Joe Shingledecker, Tony Coleman, and Ra'Shonda Magee from Flint Urban Safety Corps.

Rain cut the workday short, so a squatters' house next door to the burned site will be cleaned out and boarded up later.

Spring plans include many partners

As posted on Facebook, full-scale plans for Joliet Street start April 15 and May 13 when the Blight Squad expect to lead teams comprised of Bahá'í youth volunteers, Kettering students, new Flint Police Reserve Officers, Flint Urban Safety Corps, and Joliet Street residents. Major said teams aim to work the full length of the street according to task – clear brush, clear trash, mow, and board up. An equipment and materials station will be positioned at the center of the long street. The last squatter home will be boarded up. Major expects 50 to 100 volunteers.

Good news for this summer is that a program of AmeriCorps, the Flint Urban Safety Corps, a partnership between Genesee County United Way and UM-Flint, will be in Mott Park working on cleanup and boardup. In Flint on a three-year program, the Urban Safety Corps works in a residential swath extending from University Avenue to McLaren Hospital. Their cleanup of the Stevenson neighborhood has just ended and the results are positive. According to Michigan State Police data, a 25 percent reduction in violent crime and a 51 percent reduction in property crimes have been concurrently noted in the neighborhood.

The Urban Safety Corps will help recruit Blight Squad members, seek donations of perennial plants for roadway medians, especially Chevrolet Avenue, bike patrol the streets picking up trash, and seek funding for increased lighting and camera systems in the park and recreation area. A long, ambitious list, but the Corps will allow the Blight Squad to shift gears and concentrate on ridding the area of graffiti and maintaining cleaned properties.

And the maintenance challenge is substantial. According to Major, about 60 vacant properties need solar security lighting installed; their front yards will be seeded with "alternative lawns" (ground cover like a white

clover perennial used by the Land Bank) that reduces mowing and watering. Rototillers can be rented at Flint's Neighborhood Engagement Hub Tool Shed.

Blight enforcement in effect

Blight Squad enforcement is now in effect in Mott Park. Two uniformed safety officers work with Flint Police to monitor residential code enforcement in the neighborhood. As Major puts it, now the Mott Park "ship needs to be tightened."



Before and after, Pure Oil building

As houses have gone derelict, graffiti or tagging has proliferated. The Blight Squad goal is to paint over all tagging as quickly as possible, Major said. Alert to the geographical pattern of tagging, the Blight Squad monitors the movement of gang-type activity in Mott Park.

Several Blight Squad participants have formed the Mott Park Public Safety team to patrol the neighborhood late at night. They alert police to break-ins, count windows out and check for squatters. Summer will bring an uptick in this work, Major predicts – more street activity, more people outside late at night.

Summertime also brings problem houses, technically termed "nuisance houses." Last summer, the Blight Squad and the Mott Park Neighborhood Association worked with Kettering and neighborhood police officers to monitor a property on Frank St. Major said a record of complaints, police calls and neighbors' phone videos led to action with the Neighborhood Association able to notify the owner that the residence has been listed as a nuisance house and civil action will be taken. What seemed to be a "party house" was actually an "illegal rave." Eventually the renter was arrested.

Research suggests that deep and pervasive social and economic problems form the bedrock of residential deterioration, sometimes almost poignant in its manifes-

tations. According to Realtor.com, the burned-out house on Joliet Street was built in 1920. Zillow lists March 2015 as the last date it sold – for \$3,500.

Rental companies, many from out of state, buy up such properties. Renters need low cost housing, but few are able – for whatever reason – to maintain properties as homeowners. Mott Park, once a middle-class district, today is struggling for its life.

Mott Park's beating heart

Is the Blight Squad ready for another year of struggle?

"The work is like household chores," Major says. "You dread doing it, but you see that you must. You work as a team and the camaraderie is great. After it's done we feel good, even if we are exhausted."

At the March 26 cleanup, Blight Squad veteran and seven-year Mott Park resident Bo Cummins paused to reflect on how he felt after a year of doing this work.

"This is like a disease on the body," he said. "You have to attack it wherever it turns up. Am I discouraged? No, I love this. When I don't do anything – that's discouraging."

Steve Major is optimistic too.

"Do I think we can save the neighborhood? Questions come, sometimes I feel like we are losing the battle. My wife tells me maybe that's just because now I know more about what was always there.

"Recently, power at the Plumbers' Union building went out and there was a break-in. We have to go back and re-do the work. But the City is more responsive to our neighborhood now. The culture in Mott Park has improved, the Facebook posts are more positive," he said.

Today, the Blight Squad is part of Mott Park life, maybe even its beating heart. Other organs – the Neighborhood Association and the Mott Park Recreation Area – are healthy and functioning. But the heart is special; residents are enormously proud of the Squad's work.

Each time photos of a newly cleaned up property are posted on Facebook, neighbors pour out their gratitude and admiration. The Blight Squad Facebook banner photo (taken by Steve Major's son, Kenny) is a black-and-white shot that has a "noir" quality about it. Men with determined expressions and crossed arms as if to say – as Major said at that first cleanup back in June, 2016 – "We've just had enough."

To donate to the work of the Blight Squad, the Mott Park Neighborhood Association website provides a link for contributions earmarked for the Blight Squad. More information is available by emailing mpblightsquad@gmail.com.

EVM staff writer and columnist Teddy Robertson can be reached at teddyrob@umfint.edu.

Flint schools chief runs challenging course

By Harold C. Ford

The year 2020 is the target date for a new, consolidated Flint high school at the site of the now-abandoned Flint Central High School campus, Flint Community Schools Superintendent Bilal Tawwab said in a wide-ranging recent interview with EVM.

Reflecting upon the proximity to Flint's College and Cultural Center that Flint Central students enjoyed, Tawwab deemed the possibility an "exciting" one. "We're looking to be able to provide our kids with that same type of experience," he said. "We've even started to have conversations with Mott Community College."



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

Flint Schools Superintendent Bilal Tawwab

At 43, Tawwab has plunged into his first superintendent position, having arrived in Flint from Detroit, where he grew up, and where he was most recently assistant superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools. He has embraced downtown Flint life, having moved to a loft apartment even before he signed his contract.

A distance runner, Tawwab's professional course is challenging as he races to rescue the district from a plethora of countervailing forces: declining student enrollment; a water crisis; an eroding tax base; low test scores; and a huge deficit.

Flint schools enrollment topped 40,000 students in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s with a peak enrollment of 47,867 students in 1968. At present, Genesee County's fourth largest school district – behind Grand Blanc, Davison and Carman-Ainsworth – is struggling to maintain 5,000 students, an approximate loss of 90 percent of its student population in the past five decades.

Flint's student population, which once filled 54 school buildings, now requires only 11 schoolhouses. And that number is likely to shrink in the next few years, with the anticipated closure of the Northwestern High School campus that currently enrolls students in grades 10 thru 12, Tawwab said.

"Prior to my arrival, there was this sort of phaseout approach at Northwestern," he said, predicting that Northwestern students will likely eventually end up at Southwestern Classical Academy, which enrolls students in grades 7 thru 12.

The new profile at Southwestern is likely to exclude younger students. "All high schoolers are going to end up in one building," Tawwab predicted. "We would like to bring the kids together ... into a new building."

Neighbors voice concerns

Residents in the neighborhoods surrounding the old Flint Central campus have caught wind of the rumors about plans for construction of a new building and consolidation of Flint's secondary students at the site. Representatives from the Central Park Neighborhood Association in particular expressed their concerns at community meetings and in writing to Tawwab directly. They are requesting clarification about plans to manage vehicular and student traffic, demolition of the old high school and middle school buildings and environmental safeguards, and funding for the project in a school district that wrestled

with a \$22 million deficit as recently as 2014.

"Nothing is final," Tawwab said. "Ultimately, we're going to make decisions that are good for the kids at the end of the day. I'm not running a jail."

Tawwab said he has begun to meet with neighborhood residents about plans for the Flint Central site. "All the necessary precautions will be taken," he asserted. "We don't want folks to hear things through the rumor mill ... I do plan to sit down with people and engage in numerous conversations as we move closer, hopefully, to a 2020 opening ... We'll make sure we're good neighbors, for sure."

Funding plans under wraps for now

As to the retirement of a \$22 million deficit in two years and the whereabouts of funding for the new high school, Tawwab played it close to the vest.

"I'm not at liberty at this point to speak on the financial side," he said. "I don't feel like I'm alone ... as I engage folks in the community and get to know a lot of the players here," he continued. "Some folks even want to see the district return. And so that's good."

The layoffs and retirements of more than a hundred employees in the past two years, a seven-year wage freeze agreed to by two employee unions, and other concessions have contributed to retirement of the deficit.

Tawwab also credits an improved relationship with the Michigan Department of Treasury. "Prior to my arrival, the district had started developing a relationship with Treasury and when I arrived I continued that strong relationship," he said. "I think that type of partnership is key to the financial stability of the district."

Student retention also is key to the financial stability of the district, he said.

"Flint Community Schools currently has

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FESTIVAL OF CHOIRS

Sunday, May 7 at 4:00p

Reception to follow Free admission

Hear our children's choirs, adult choir and handbell choir performing some of their favorite selections from the past year, and also some new ones, including selections from our newly acquired hymnal, *Glory to God*. Brass quintet, percussion, flute, piano, and of course organ, will add to the resounding excitement that you will experience! Encourage and invite someone new to church that afternoon!



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... Tawwab

(Continued from Page 8.)

about 5,000 kids,” Tawwab said. “There’s a total of 15,000 school-age kids in the city of Flint. We have a third of the market share,” with about two-thirds of Flint’s school-age children attending other schools.

Of those two-thirds, about 5,000 students take advantage of the State School Aid Act for Schools of Choice and enroll in school districts other than Flint. According to an M-Live report, “Of Westwood Heights’ 1,344 full-time equivalent students in fall 2014, 840 were from outside the district, including 699 who lived in the Flint school system.” In other words, 52 percent of Westwood Heights students came from Flint.

Another 5,000 students who live in Flint opt to attend charter schools, reflecting concerns by some parents that Flint’s school children are underachieving.

Test scores underlie parent worries

Recent test scores appear to support those worries. Test data from the website of Michigan School Data, *mischooldata.org*, includes the following:

- 2015-2016 M-STEP Math test, all grades 3-8: 125 students, or 5.4%, tested At or Above Proficiency;
- 2015-2016 M-STEP Science test, grades 4 and 7: 701 of 710 students tested Partially (55 students) or Not (646 students) Proficient;
- 2015-2016 M-STEP ELA (English Language Arts) test, all grades 3-8: 2,126 students were tested; 320 students, or 14.7%, tested At or Above Proficiency; 565, or 26.5%, tested Partially Proficient; 1,241, or 58%, tested Not Proficient;
- 2015-2016 M-STEP Social Studies test, grades 5 and 8: 612 Flint students were tested; 12 students, or 2%, tested At or Above Proficiency; 212 students, or 35%, tested Partially Proficient; 388 students, or 63%,

tested Not Proficient; 43% of the students in the Genesee Intermediate School District tested At or Above Proficiency; 44% of students in Michigan tested At or Above Proficiency;

- 2015-2016 M-STEP Science test, 11th grade: 6.5% of Flint students tested At or Above Proficiency; 18.2% tested Partially Proficient; 75.3% tested Not Proficient;

- 2015-2016 SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), Mathematics, grade 11: 10 Flint students, or 4%, of 232 students tested At or Above Proficiency;

- 2015-2016 SAT EBRW (Evidence Based Reading and Writing) test, grade 11: 37 Flint students, or 16%, tested At or Above Proficiency; 2,575 of 4,536 students tested in Genesee County, or 56%, tested At or Above Proficient.

Aiming for alternate assessment methods

“We have the high stakes tests across the country,” Tawwab said, noting that in Michigan, it’s M-STEP, which he called “a lagging indicator.” Suggesting testing is not the only way to assess learning, he strongly favors rigorous use of formative assessment, a method of measuring student learning not just by once-a-year tests but step-by-step throughout a course and school year. In formative assessment, feedback is provided along the way – to both students and teachers – so that finding out what students are learning is more closely matched in real time to the skills they are being taught and to the teachers’ methods.

“I’m trying to get our teachers and our leaders to focus on the effective use of formative assessments to really drive the work they’re doing with kids. You need to know daily where that child is ... and begin to adjust your instruction to be able to meet that child’s needs.”

“So I just want to develop this culture where ... we’re constantly monitoring for learning,” Tawwab continued. “And if you do that, you’re going to perform on these high-

stakes tests.”

In the meantime, however, the precipitous and continuing loss of students to charter schools and Schools of Choice means a concomitant loss of state aid. The current per pupil amount of financial aid from the State of Michigan, for most districts, ranges from \$7,500 to \$8,200. Rounding that amount to \$8,000 means that a loss of 10,000 students results in a revenue loss to Flint schools of some \$80 million. And that does not include the loss of financial aid from the federal government.

Asked if the election of Donald Trump to the presidency and his selection of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education adds fuel to the fire of financially challenged public school

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... Tawwab

(Continued from Page 9.)

systems, Tawwab replied, “They [the Trump administration] are projecting some decline in federal dollars. We’re just going to stay tuned.”

“I’m always going to be an advocate for public education,” Tawwab said. “I’m a product of public education. My siblings, my friends, we’ve all done well. We in public education, we’re going to have to come together and tell our own story ... from my perspective, there is competition. We can’t now sit back and say we’re the number one choice ... It’s important that we come together and tell the story, tell the great things that are going on in our public schools.”

Compounding the difficulty for Tawwab in attempting to retain his students and attract others is, of course, the Flint water crisis. He arrived as Flint’s new superintendent in August of 2015, just as the full scope of the crisis was unfolding.

School officials, alarmed by the emerging details, shut off water in Flint schools by the third week of September. In October 2015, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality disclosed that three buildings within the district – Eisenhower, Freeman, and Brownell/Holmes – had tested above the federal limits for lead in the drinking water.

“One thing I was happy about was that the schools had settled,” Tawwab recalled. “We had already adjusted to providing our kids with bottled water; we had changed our meal plan; we were shipping in water to prepare their meals; we had already started providing more peeled fruit instead of fruit they were required to rinse.”

It’s likely that no other newly-installed superintendent in the nation has ever had to wrestle with such a crisis.

“I didn’t really have a sounding board,” he recalled. “Folks would listen, (and say) ‘Oh my god, this is unbelievable!’ But no one could advise ... no one had an experience of this magnitude. We did OK, but it was definitely an interesting start to a superintendency.”

Students are still not drinking out of the fountains, according to Tawwab. “Some are using the showers,” he said. “Overall, there’s a lack of confidence in the water quality ... Actually, the quality of the water in the schools has improved.”

Tawwab indicated that faucets and other fixtures have been replaced, but he won’t resume use of Flint water for drinking or food prep until he gets full assurances from the

medical community that the water is safe. “Right now, I don’t think the medical community is willing to sign off on such a decision,” he said.

Asked about predicted increases in challenging behaviors by Flint children as a result of lead ingestion, Tawwab said, “Right now we can’t say that we’re seeing a change in our children,” he said. “We’ve just been working at putting our ... multi-tier system of support that addresses behavior in a very positive and proactive way and that addresses the academic demands or deficiencies in some cases. That’s the piece we control.”

Something beyond the direct control of Superintendent Tawwab are lawsuits, like the one filed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan in October, 2016. M-Live’s Roberto Acosta reported that “the 130-page complaint seeks injunctive relief – not a monetary judgment – including the following corrective actions:

- Identifying and meeting the academic and behavioral needs of all Flint students in the FCS school district.
- Positive behavioral interventions implemented in every school with training provided to all administrators, teachers and staff, including school resource officers.
- Prevention of unnecessary and illegal suspensions and expulsions.
- Require all Flint schools to identify and provide for special education services and accommodations for children with disabilities.
- Ensure all necessary resources comply with requirements of federal law.
- Oversight and monitoring of corrective measures needed to meet the educational needs of all students.

• Convene a panel of experts to evaluate current special education services in Flint.”

ACLU staff attorney Kristin Totten provided the ACLU rationale for the lawsuit: “I was very concerned that kids with special ed needs that were exposed to lead are going to have worse disabilities ... that they’re going to have struggles with behavior and learning challenges, and health issues ... that are going to be undetected if the school district isn’t supported and able to adequately address those needs.”

Tawwab hardly sees the lawsuit as supportive. “I don’t feel it was the best approach,” he said. “So I am working as superintendent to improve the public’s confidence in Flint Community Schools with the hopes that we will become the number one educational asset in the city,” he continued. “When you have a lawsuit like this, some of our citizenry will think, ‘Flint Community Schools, here we go again, they don’t have their stuff together; they’re not going to be able to meet the needs

of our kids; let me go to some other option.”

“We filed this (lawsuit) with the Flint Community Schools because we knew they were going to need some resources; they were going to need help and support,” Totten said. “We heard Superintendent Tawwab speaking to the congressional panel, stating that what keeps him up at night is the special education needs that he’s going to have to address for years to come ... but when the 75-point plan from the governor rolled out it didn’t have any special education supports for further screening or identification of children with needs that could have developed because of the exposure to the neurotoxins.”

Tawwab contends the district is working proactively to be ready, noting the district “has received a lot of grant dollars from the state and federal levels that’s allowed us to hire additional social workers, psychologists, speech pathologists – key staff members that would be responsible for responding to the needs of all our kids.”

So the Detroit-born Tawwab, an avid runner, is in the race of his life to rescue the besieged school district he now presides over. The grit and dogged determination required of long-distance runners like Tawwab may serve him well as he tackles the challenges faced by Flint schools. Offering a wry smile, he noted, “Folks do look at me and say, ‘Man, you’ve got a lot of work to do.’”

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... Pierce

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hood's hopes and needs.

So another key player in the hoop house story is Kyle Peppin, hired by Crim as Pierce's community school director. His role is to be the hub for the school's many-faceted emergent community education programs. Following an assessment involving parents, teachers, neighbors, staff and students, improvements to the school property surfaced as a shared value. And he says he's delighted the hoop house has emerged as one of the program's first manifestations.

Students learn at every step, neighborhood joins in

Community education, Peppin explained, is a strategy to bridge several disparate elements together: the neighborhood around the school, the parents, the staff and of course, the students.

"Part of that, one thing that made sense is the physical space of the school and improving that," Peppin said. "It's a sign of the impact we're having."

"And it's functional – it's something people see every day," he noted. Crucially, he emphasized, Pierce's 245 students will participate in every step: cleanup, planting, weeding, harvesting, preparing the harvest. And while USDA rules prohibit using hoop house produce in school lunches, the vegetables can be used for "educational snacks" as part of classroom lessons on gardening and nutrition and to take home. An after-school group called "Sprouts Scouts" focuses on fun activities built around the garden.

Beyond the hoop house, Peppin hopes people begin to think of the school as a place to participate, to do other things – "knitting clubs, zumba, whatever."

"People don't typically think of schools as a community place, but we're trying to change that," Peppin said. "This is why Doug's plan is so appealing – it's a visible reminder that community ed is back. We'll be able to make this happen." He said funding is secure for Phase One, and he's optimistic about possibilities for what comes next.

Volunteer contributions will be welcome along the way, Peppin said, while adding that "we want to be deliberate in how we ask for volunteers" and noting that schools require background checks on people coming onsite. But donations for flowers and other elements of the plan are welcome and should be sent to the

Crim Foundation, designated for Pierce Creative Arts Elementary.

Planting time is almost here

In the meantime, Food Corps worker Rae Schmitt, also part of the Crim community education program, wants to get the seeds in and get the greenhouse up and running. The hoop house is a first step opening up to many options. And Jones, Peppin and Walling all anticipate there will be an official celebration when the project is fulfilled.

"I hope it will be clear that we want the community to be involved in the school. We want the community to know that we have a community garden here at Pierce," Peppin said.



Photo by Jan Worth-Nelson

Kyle Peppin (l) and volunteer Doug Jones at the Pierce School hoop house

Walling added, "We hope it is clear that Pierce is still our neighborhood school. At 7:45 a.m. every day you will see it – students still walking to school, and three or more adults helping them safely cross the streets."

"The whole yard is a major spot for the neighborhood kids," Jones added, noting he can see pickup basketball games going on frequently from his own front yard. "This is what we want to build on." In fact, program planners hope some of those kids who might have vandalized the hoop house would see that the refurbished project is for their little brothers and sisters – and maybe even get involved in helping with the project themselves.

In the meantime, the skeleton of the hoop house awaits the slight spring warming that means its new life is about to begin.

"Rae Schmitt assures me the soil is ready," Doug Jones says. So it appears Pierce's life is taking a green turn for its neighborhood, its teachers, its staff, its parents and most of all, the children learning every day how the world sometimes offers blooms of hope.

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... Taxes

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degree in Flint) the tax revenues usually can't rise faster than the rate of inflation. Even when property values return to their old levels, it can take a long time for revenues to catch up.

Other types of taxes?

The upshot of all this is that if we expect a full range of services from local governments, we'll have to adjust our ways of taxing ourselves and paying for it. It won't be easy. Every suggested change will arouse strong opposition from those wedded to the current system.

As we move from a manufacturing economy to a service economy, should we tax services? Don't expect any support from doctors, dentists, barbers and others who provide personal service to us.

Should we tax internet purchases more vigorously? The brick and mortar stores will like the idea but don't count on Amazon to be on board.

Want to broaden the tax base and move to a regional or area-wide government? Don't expect support from those in the out-county who "don't want to take on Flint's problems," as many put it. And don't expect those who now have earned power in Flint to willingly give it up to a regional government.

Trust and taxes

Obviously the issue of taxes is a long and complex one. But behind all the debates about taxes is one issue that has been a critical one for Flint on many issues – the issue of trust.

If we expect people to pay taxes, they expect to get what they pay for. The public needs to trust that their taxes will deliver good roads, bridges, clean water, consistent trash collection, reliable police and fire protection along with many other services. The government must deliver the goods competently and honestly.

While taxes will never be popular, when that trust is there at least the public can feel they are getting its money's worth. When the trust is gone, then those who vote "no" on any taxes will carry the day and public services continue to suffer.

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More local news at
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Village Life

Hoop house project seeds rebirth of community ed at Pierce

By Jan Worth-Nelson

Sometimes the news is good.

As the country emerges from a bruising winter and Flint struggles out of a three-year water crisis, some of the best neighborhood news this spring, like a little bunch of bright crocuses, is exquisitely quiet, small-scale, and promisingly local. And some of those small blooms are signs of a larger, cumulating bouquet of hopeful developments.

Consider, for example, the hoop house at Pierce Creative Arts Elementary School. Vandalized more than once over the past few years, the greenhouse project recently has been reduced to a dispiriting metal skeleton and eight wooden planters filled with crusty, hard dirt.

But this spring, a determined coalition of grown-ups – a former mayor whose kids attended the school for 11 years, a neighborhood retiree whose own grandchildren are seven hundred miles away, donors, teachers, foundation officials, an Americorps/Food Corps team and a devoted community school director – have

decided the project will be revived. They have organized it into two phases: one for the greenhouse itself, and another for a larger set of improvements around the school.

They envision that by Memorial Day, seedlings of chard, beets, zucchini and other vegetables will be tucked into humus. They envision a pollinator garden nearby to attract and assist bees and butterflies. They see a flourishing learning environment for children built around real-life, outdoor pleasures.

In the process, they are demonstrating how a neighborhood, a school and a lot of charitable local and national initiatives can work together to make something good happen in Flint and plant faith in the future.

One catalyst behind the project is Doug Jones, a Flint native and retired architect who deliberately moved back to his hometown after decades of innovative practice and teaching in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Princeton, Baltimore, Greenville, South Carolina and elsewhere. He recently bought a small bungalow on Calumet, just a block from the school, which he's been happily rehabbing into what he calls "the tuxedo house" – an elegant minimalist remaking, inside and out, in black and white. He's also a post-graduate-trained sociologist, and has been reveling in getting to know the people and his neighborhood south of Court Street and west of Gilkey Creek.

Schools should be attractive and well-designed

In his efforts to be useful, Jones has joined forces with, among others, former Flint Mayor Dayne Walling. Walling also lives in the neighborhood and, through his two sons, both of whom have gone to Pierce, has been a parent volunteer for 11 years.

Jones enlisted several members of the American Institute of Architects local chapter to volunteer design help for what Jones hopes will be exterior improvements at Pierce. Schools should be attractive, well-designed places, he says, communicating to students through good maintenance, thoughtful layouts and even beauty that learning matters. He also has recruited a parent who's a carpenter to repair the greenhouse structure, along with a horticulturalist from Applewood to consult on maintenance and landscape elements.

For Phase Two, he has located a retired paving contractor willing to help patch the adjoining parking lot and sidewalks. Jones says he would love to see Vernon Street surrounding the school also repaired, not just for the students but for teachers, parents and the many joggers and walkers who regularly populate the neighborhood.

"I've suggested that we be directed and guided by the objective of student learning," Jones said. "And I suggest, don't stop at what you've got by just putting a Band-Aid over what's there. Let's step back and ask ourselves, what would be best for the learning environment?"

Part of a rebirth of community ed

There's more. The significance of the greenhouse goes beyond its hopeful sprouts. It represents one physical manifestation of a larger evolution: the re-emergence and resurrection of community education in Flint.

Flint old-timers well remember community education: brainchild and progeny of Frank Manley and the C.S. Mott Foundation in the 50s and 60s, when the then-burgeoning city got national attention for how its public schools became flourishing neighborhood hubs. Nationally, Manley still is considered the father of community education and the Flint model continues to be studied, revered and replicated.

However, as the city's fortunes faded, its population dwindling and more than three dozen out of 55 schools eventually closing, community ed in Flint's public schools died off too. But two years ago, a remarkable thing happened: the Mott Foundation brought some of its money back to community ed, revivifying the venerable Flint idea for a generation whose grandparents were the last to enjoy it. Walling recalled the upbeat momentum of the partnerships put together in 2015, the last year of his administration, a positive development quietly building as the water crisis dominated with a different story.

The Crim Fitness Foundation was selected as "lead partner" to receive Mott funds and implement the community education program. A key provision is that each of the Flint School District's 11 remaining schools received a community schools director to coordinate and customize community ed for each neighbor-

(Continued on Page 11.)

LV:4 (647 issues, 6,483 pages)

CRYONICS By Grayce Scholt

Twenty-five earthworms
in April moonlight
are strung along what's
left of a snowbank
by a curb.

A dog comes barking,
bark! Summoned so
his own man plucks
the squirming strings,
drops them in a pail,
and takes them home,
where in his kitchen, neat,
he packs the wriggling clump
in foil between two TV dinners –
turkey, ham and sweets.

Good for trout
he tells the dog and
slams the freezer
shut.

Grayce Scholt is a retired English professor from Mott College who wrote art reviews for the Flint Journal. Her book of poetry, Bang! Go All the Porch Swings, is available online from Amazon. A personal narrative of the poet's life in Europe in the early 1950s, Vienna, Only You, is available at gscholt09@comcast.net. The author's new book of poems, Night Song, is available from Friesen Press (www.friesenpress.com) and Amazon.