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## GOVERNMENTAL FRAGMENTATION IN METROPOLITAN DETROIT

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### ABSTRACT

At its population peak in the 1950's, Detroit, Michigan was inhabited by almost two million residents and served as the car capital of the country. Today, however, the population has dropped by more than fifty percent. With the loss of Detroit residents to surrounding cities and counties, the wedge between Detroit and the suburbs has grown wider. Detroit, once considered the crown jewel of the state of Michigan, is now treated as an immovable stain by its surrounding municipalities. What this means for the metro Detroit area is a high level of governmental fragmentation, preventing economic opportunities for both the city and its suburbs. This is especially unfortunate for the economy of the metro Detroit area because of the current economic crisis in the state of Michigan. With the state's long tradition of home rule and pride in autonomous, municipal decision-making, municipalities in the metro Detroit area might better realize economic opportunities and the relief they can bring to their own local economies by not only collaborating with the city of Detroit, but with neighboring cities as well.

### INTRODUCTION

The metropolitan Detroit area is comprised of seven counties—Wayne, Livingston, Washtenaw, Macomb, Oakland, St. Clair, and Monroe—with 238 municipalities, and is defined for census purposes as the Detroit-Warren-Livonia statistical area. The metro Detroit area has a population of about 4.8 million residents and an area of 4,598.1 square miles (SEMCOG, 2011).

As defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), a metropolitan area is considered to be “a large population nucleus, together with adjacent communities having a high degree of social and economic integration with that core.” The incongruity between this definition and the present condition of the metro Detroit area is that, despite a high level of economic interaction between municipalities, there is also a lack of social interaction, which contributes to governmental fragmentation. Detroit has become a nuisance and an eyesore to some nearby suburbs, with citizens only visiting the city for sports or concert events. Although Detroit has prime waterfront property and is only minutes from Windsor, Ontario, many people choose to live, work, and enjoy entertainment outside the city. Most leisure attractions can be found within the suburbs of the metro Detroit area, where citizens over four decades have created their own isolated communities to avoid going to Detroit.

If citizens in the metro Detroit area do not want to visit the city of Detroit, then why would someone who lives outside Michigan ever want to visit the city? Detroit still has a population of over 700,000 people, but it has no major retail or food districts. Businesses still in operation are scattered about the city among vacant buildings. Furthermore, people do not have the convenience of visiting the city without driving a car, because no system of mass transportation links Detroit to other municipalities besides the Smart Bus system. However, that system sees minimal use because of the considerable influence of the automotive industry on economic and transportation development in metro Detroit. The only significant form of economic interaction the city of Detroit has with other municipalities is the contract to receive water from Detroit. Yet that may soon change as cities look to obtain a piece of ownership of the water plant as well. Suburban cities within the metro Detroit area have attempted to create communities that are socially and economically independent from the city of Detroit. For the city

of Detroit and suburban municipalities to experience growth, a first step is to pursue intergovernmental cooperation to create economic growth for the region as a whole.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The history of Detroit plays an important role in the formation of communities in the metro Detroit region. In the early to mid-twentieth century, thousands of people, both white and black, flocked to Detroit for auto-plant assembly jobs that offered average, unskilled workers a salary sufficient to attain a middle-class lifestyle. However, the desire to buy a nice home and earn a decent living was not a strong enough motive to end segregation in the city of Detroit. Although there were plenty of jobs in the city, African Americans were denied employment because of their race. Some manufacturing plants were known to have no African Americans employees. Often managers and supervisors discriminated against African Americans because they believed hiring an African American into an all-white plant would create discord among the workers (Sugrue, 1998, 92-93). When African Americans were hired into these plants, they were given the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs. Often the only positions available to African Americans were custodial or car painting, which subjected workers to harsh chemicals. Furthermore, the decentralization of auto plants and gradual decline of manufacturing jobs played a pivotal role in the way the metro Detroit area looks today. Once the promise of manufacturing jobs began to decline, so did the reason for living in the city.

In the later years of the twentieth century, economic growth in the city of Detroit severely lagged when compared to its neighboring suburbs. As the population of African American migrants in the city increased, the number of white residents decreased. By the 1980's, foreign automakers dominated the U.S. car market and U.S. automobile companies began to decline in

profitability (Swallow, 2010, p. 50). Decentralization occurred even faster as a result of businesses and white residents moving out of the city into nearby suburbs (Darden, Hill, and Thomas, 1987, p.64). Local shop owners closed their doors and downtown department buildings shut down as white immigrants moved away. Wealthy middle-class families and firms migrated steadily to the suburbs, leaving behind a population in Detroit still predominantly black and poor.

Once most businesses left the city, the poverty level in Detroit increased. With no major industries in the city to reduce high unemployment rates, Detroiters began to rely on state assistance for survival. Tables 1., 2. and 3. illustrate the shift in Detroit’s racial demographic from a city once predominately white to now over eighty percent black. In addition, the tables show a growing disparity between unemployment rates, poverty rates, and median income of the city of Detroit and the metro area. The lack of local revenues and a growing population of citizens in need of aid places great stress on a city already in economic hardship.

**Table 1. Population of whites and blacks in the City of Detroit (1950-2010)**

Year	Total Population	Black Population	Percent Black	White Population	Percent White
1950	1,849, 568	300,506	16.2	1,269,377	68.6
1960	1,670,144	482,229	28.9	1,182,970	70.8
1970	1,514,063	660,428	44.5	838,877	55.4
1980	1,203,368	754, 274	62.6	402, 077	33.4
1990	1,027,974	774,529	75.3	212,278	20.7
2000	951,270	771,966	81.2	99,921	10.5
2010	713,777	586,573	82.2	55,604	7.8

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010, final population, Detroit, Mich., *Census of Population: Characteristics of Population*.

**Table 2. Percentage of Citizens in Poverty in Detroit and Metro Area (1960-2010)**

Year	City of Detroit	Metro Detroit
1960	19	13.5
1970	14.9	8.5
1980	10.7	10.2
1990	32	12.7
2000	25.6	10.4
2010	33.2	17

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010, final population, Detroit, Mich., *Census of Population: Characteristics of Population*; SEMCOG 2011. SEMCOG 2011. *Michigan Economic Update: August 2009*.

**Table 3. Median Family Income of Families in Detroit and Metro Area (1960-2010)**

Year	City of Detroit	Metro Detroit
1960	6,069	6,825
1970	10,045	13,371
1980	17,033	21,192
1990	25,116	46,511
2000	29,526	49,979
2010	26,098	39,028

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 economic characteristics, Detroit, Mich., *Census Population: Characteristics of Population*; SEMCOG:2011. U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Survey of Current Business*, April 2010.

Housing segregation in the city of Detroit also explains fragmentation between Detroit and adjacent cities. With the flood of people rushing into the city looking for manufacturing jobs after WWII, an extremely high demand for housing naturally followed. However, the pace of residential construction lagged behind the pace of people moving into the city. Even more important, many new homes built were denied to African Americans. Most homes built immediately following World War II were priced significantly above the price-range the average

African American worker could afford (Sugrue, 1998, 43). And, if African Americans went to Detroit banks to apply for home loans, they were denied frequently because they were perceived by lenders to be high-risk (Sugrue, 1998, 43).

The neighborhoods of Detroit soon became literal battlegrounds for racial integration and segregation. White homeowners saw African American homeownership in their neighborhoods as a threat to their property values and their neighborhood. Soon, white homeowners created associations as a way to keep their neighborhoods white. If the homeowners' association did not work, and an African American did decide to move into the neighborhood, white neighbors sometimes intimidated them and vandalized their homes (Sugrue, 1998, 45). Often, African American neighbors moved out soon after.

Segregation in Detroit did not exist due to race alone; African Americans in the city segregated themselves based on class and income as well. As white homeowners began to move out of Detroit, the African American population expanded across the city. Middle-class African Americans moved into neighborhoods once all-white, and although to a much lesser degree, this particular socioeconomic class of African Americans was as protective of their "investments" as the former white residents had been. This class of African Americans was concerned with disproving stereotypes about African Americans and their inability to maintain their homes and neighborhoods. With this attitude, middle-class African Americans began to protest low-income housing, apartment buildings, or multi-unit tenements being constructed in their neighborhoods. Any type of building project that gave low-income families the ability to move from the poor, concentrated central area of the city into a middle-class neighborhood was generally denounced (Sugrue, 1998, 63). Eventually, however, many low-income African American families did move into middle-class African American neighborhoods, and, in response, many of these same

middle-class families moved from the city to suburbs like Southfield and Oak Park, now predominately populated by African Americans as well.

Segregation and racial tensions between whites and blacks in the city of Detroit held implications for the discrimination of race and class that would occur in the suburbs. Once white and middle-class African American homeowners moved into suburbs, class and race lines were drawn again. Cities such as Hazel Park and Warren were mostly occupied by lower working-class whites, Dearborn by middle-class whites, and Birmingham by the wealthy. In 1941, the city of Ferndale “built a brick wall, eight feet high and a half-mile long, to separate black and white residents in the areas” (Darden, Hill, Thomas and Thomas, 1987, 113). Whites continued to vehemently oppose integration. The city of Dearborn was notorious for its discrimination against African Americans through public policies and blatant, de-facto discrimination. Table 4. shows the lack of racial integration within metro Detroit suburbs into the 1980s:

**Table 4. Population of whites and blacks in Metro Detroit Suburbs (1950-1980)**

Population Places	1950		1960		1970		1980	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Hazel Park	17,757	5	Beverly Hills Village 8,626	7	Bloomfield Township 3,603	31	Algonac 4,339	1
Holly Village	2,660	2	Farmington 6,877	3	Dearborn Heights 79,720	12	Brighton 4,152	5
Huntington Woods	4921	27	Flat Rock 4,694	2	Franklin 3,333	8	Howell 6,870	4
Livonia	17513	8	Fraser 7,026	0	Gibraltar 3,315	1	Lapeer Cty 6,017	26
Oak Park	5258	9	Harper Woods 19,968	3	Grosse Pointe 2,890	7	Marine City 4,387	1
			Keego Harbor 2,755	2	Lake Orion Heights 2,545	0	Marysville 7,288	0
			Lake Orion 2,698	0	Oxford 2,528	0	Metamora 551	0
			Lathrup Village 3,556	0	Rockwood 3,114	2	North Branch 889	0
			Madison Heights 33,257	13	South Lyon 2,673	0	Port Huron 30,940	2,127
			Millford 4,320	0	Sterling Heights 61,077	38	St. Clair City 4,739	0
			New Baltimore 3,148	0	Taylor 69,680	20		
			Novi 6,374	9	Utica 3,487	5		
			Richmond 2,667	0	Westland 84,099	2,234		
			Riverview 7,232	0	Wolverine Lake Village 4,284	0		
			Southfield 31,435	34	Woodhaven 3,313	1		
			Southgate 29,377	1				
			Troy 19,025	3				
			Walled Lake 3,547	0				
			Warren 89,072	19				

Source: U.S Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1950, 1960, 1970 and 1980, final population



and housing counts, Detroit, Mich., *Census of Population and Housing*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office) as cited by Darden, Hill, Thomas and Thomas, 1987.

The private, business-oriented economy of Detroit and its suburbs also contributed to the fragmentation and economic decline of the metro Detroit area. This economic development plan bases the city's economic fate on the external influence of private businesses (James and Green, 2009), and pits municipalities against each other, as each battles to ensure that businesses will sign contracts and locate in its municipality. This is evident in the heavy use of abatements and subsidies local government officials use to lure businesses to their cities. That metro Detroit is in an economic downturn makes the negative effects of fragmentation even more profound, because now all municipalities are struggling to uphold their own economic base, and to compete more successfully with other municipalities for fewer business opportunities. As early as the 1950's and 1960's, "suburban areas like Southfield and Troy lured manufacturers out of Detroit, and corporations chose to settle just across city lines to take advantage of incentives and lower taxes" (Savitch and Kantor, 2002, as cited in Swallow, 2010, 51).

Michigan's tradition of home rule also contributes to the fragmentation of the metro Detroit area. Home rule provides a certain degree of autonomous power delegated to sub-units of government by the state, which limits the amount of interference state governments can have in local government matters. The Home Rule City Act of Michigan of 1909 allowed for many communities to become their own municipalities, and to remove themselves somewhat from the tight political and fiscal grip of state government. Fifty years after the adoption of the Home Rule City Act of 1909, "Michigan had 219 cities and 291 villages, and of these, 186 cities and 51 villages had framed and adopted home rule charters" (Bromage, 1961, 4). Michigan municipalities prefer to be independent in their political and economic affairs, which have

become very costly as a result of the loss of tax-based revenue during the current economic recession.

With the autonomy of Michigan municipalities came greater control for local government officials and larger budgets. According to Visser, “direct provision of services contributes to the community’s identity, character, and quality of life, and enables elected officials to provide personalized services to residents” (2004, as cited in Jelier and Sands, 2009, 209). However, with the size of some municipalities in the metro Detroit area, choosing autonomy over efficiency has become an issue. Many municipalities have overlapping civil responsibilities, such as police and fire protection, in order to exhibit more control over local government matters and to propose larger annual budgets. Nonetheless, several municipalities in the Detroit region have suffered heavy blows to their local economies and had to severely cut their budgets. Some municipalities have laid-off half their firefighters and police officers and cut public services. For example, in 2011, the Allen Park City Council decided to layoff the entire staff of its fire department (Jackson, 2011). A more efficient and economical way of handling these challenges is for two or more municipalities to combine certain city services, to save money and avoid budget cuts. Some examples of intergovernmental cooperation in metro Detroit exist; for instance, “the Oakland County Sherriff’s Office provides street patrol services by contract to Rochester Hills and ten township governments in the county (Martindale and Feighan 2007 as cited by Jelier and Sands, 2009, 207).

The construction of the interstate highway system in the 1950s and 1960s also played a role in the uneven development and fragmentation of Detroit from its suburban counterparts. This construction cut Detroit neighborhoods in half and allowed for easier access to suburbs (Sugrue, 1998, 47). Construction of the highway system also increased the demand for

automobiles and limited the idea of a mass transportation system for Detroit as well as nearby cities. Once the highway was constructed, people could easily drive onto it and be in the next city in minutes. This allowed for those who lived in the suburbs to work in the city of Detroit, which meant that people were earning wages in Detroit, but, for the most part, that money was spent in other cities. Soon, the jobs that had required suburbanites to commute to the city relocated outside Detroit, solving the suburbanite’s dilemma. The lack of mass transportation from the city of Detroit to nearby municipalities also helps explain the lack of economic interaction between the central city and suburbs. The creation of highways made it easier for people to access most suburbs in the metro Detroit area, which made traveling to Detroit, for many, a non-necessity. Table 5. exhibits the large percentage of workers who live in suburbs outside the city and commute to Detroit for work.

**Table 5. Number of Workers who Live or Commute to Detroit**

Where Residents Commute From	Workers	Percent
Detroit	154,933	48.7%
Southfield	8,207	2.6%
Warren	6,695	2.1%
Dearborn	5,891	1.9%
Sterling Heights	5,300	1.7%
Livonia	5,215	1.6%
Farmington Hills	4,555	1.4%
St. Clair Shores	4,394	1.4%
Clinton Township	4,097	1.3%
Westland	4,050	1.3%
-Elsewhere	114,704	36.1%
*workers age 16 or over	318,041	100.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Census by SEMCOG

The “fight or flight” syndrome of racial interactions within metro Detroit municipalities is harmful, not only because it amplifies an undertone of racism, but also because the “flight” leaves behind economically declining municipalities in its wake. Although citizens of metro Detroit may think it best to simply pick up and move to another city, every time they think the

city they are living in has become substandard, it actually hurts the county, the metro Detroit region, and the state of Michigan as a whole. When whites and middle-class blacks left Detroit to live in nearby suburban municipalities, they left behind a population that was still predominately poor and African American. Once this huge number of upper, middle, and working-class citizens left the city, businesses and firms followed suit, taking a large chunk of tax-based revenue with them. With only a small number of jobs left in the city, many being low-wage jobs, the citizens of Detroit began to rely on the state of Michigan for aid. This aid paid to low-income citizens of Detroit comes right from the pockets of the citizens of Michigan, including those who first moved away to separate themselves from the city.

## **DISCUSSION**

Cities within the metro Detroit area must begin to look at themselves as members of one region, with common goals and economic interests, not as a multitude of municipalities with separate economic objectives, pursuing survival on their own. Municipalities cannot rely solely on themselves to provide incentives for citizens to stay in the metro Detroit area, or even in the state of Michigan. There is nothing wrong with the desire to live in the suburbs, but the reason for moving should not be failure or decline of the central city. The city of Detroit is still viable, given its location, and it has the potential to return to economic prosperity if the right economic development plan is employed to reinvent the city.

The need for collaboration between the city of Detroit and nearby municipalities is now greater than ever with the current economic recession in Michigan. The Detroit-Warren-Livonia (MSA) statistical area has one of lowest economic growth rates of major metro areas in the entire United States. “Historical racial tensions have created long-term divisions and make it difficult

for the city of Detroit and the surrounding suburbs to work together...racial and economic separations have limited cooperative efforts to a few regionally supported recreation and entertainment venues” (Swallow, 2010, 50). The metro Detroit area is a prime example of one suffering economically from fragmentation. Opportunities for horizontal collaboration between Detroit and other municipalities are endless, but first, the region has to rebuild its economy through new industries, such as engineering and research, to replace the jobs lost to the decline in manufacturing.

Fragmentation of the metro Detroit area has translated into the economic collapse of the city of Detroit and the temporary economic rise of its suburban counterparts, now experiencing economic downturns of their own. The ultimate goal for collaboration between Detroit and its suburban counterparts is that all units of government experience economic growth, rather than the past metropolitan economic development scenario, which entailed the decline of the central city giving way to the prosperity of suburban municipalities. Before major collaborative efforts between the city of Detroit and suburbs within the metro Detroit area occur, citizens must abandon the fight-or-flight syndrome and municipalities must understand the important effect the condition of the central city has on its suburbs. To prosper, metro Detroit has to overcome its history of segregation based on race and class. Also important for the metro Detroit area as a whole is the implementation of new economic policies that encourage horizontal cooperation between municipalities and a new economy that includes industries in high demand, such as engineering and biotechnology.

Apart from the history and current condition of the economy in metro Detroit, several obstacles prevent municipal collaboration. The first political barrier to intergovernmental cooperation is the unwillingness of government leaders to share control in decision-making.

Political leaders are accustomed to a high level of independence in decision-making because of the home rule act; however, it is impractical for all leaders to exert the same amount of control over a joint service. A strategy for overcoming this political barrier is to create an intergovernmental administrative board that shares control with the parent government entities (SEMCOG, 2003). This strategy, too, faces challenges, because it is much harder for a board comprised of members of different backgrounds and opinions to come to a consensus, then make decisions about which the government leaders of the parent entities agree. Decisions on the size, representation and responsibilities of intergovernmental administration boards bring their own challenges, yet agreements between government entities are very important in settling such issues. Lack of fiscal control can prove both a barrier and a cause for failure in joint governmental ventures. Strategies for achieving fiscal control include required reports from the administrative board to the government entities on a regular basis and interlocal agreements with concise language that express the expectations for proper maintenance of financial affairs (SEMCOG, 2003).

The second set of political barriers that hinders intergovernmental cooperation are differing cultures, community relations, and government relations. Communities are most successful in joint ventures when participating governments share similar demographics (SEMCOG, 2003). Furthermore, communities with similar education levels, income levels, and racial or ethnic makeup are more likely to receive support for intergovernmental cooperation. Existing stereotypes and misperceptions about residents living in nearby municipalities can lead to fears that the joint venture will create opportunities for one group over another, or that one community will take advantage of the opportunity by over-utilizing the program or service. Each community has its own values, and one may place more value on a program or service than

another. The community can exhibit the importance of a program or service through significant financial support for the project. A community may not be willing to support the neighboring community's lack of financial commitment, and fear of one municipality politically dominating the other may arise from the proposal of intergovernmental cooperation. Strategies for overcoming cultural barriers include the creation of smaller programs or services to ease residents in joint services and events that provide opportunities for residents to interact (SEMCOG, 2003).

The presence of politically-dominating interest groups can also undermine efforts at intergovernmental cooperation. If residents of a neighboring jurisdiction perceive the special interests of a community to be the attainment of resources and influence for their own advantage, fear of special interest domination by the other community may arise (SEMCOG, 2003). Strategies for overcoming barriers of community relations are the creation of a concise agreement that protects community interests and of a moderately autonomous administrative board to run the joint program or service (SEMCOG, 2003).

Fear of citizen alienation as a result of intergovernmental cooperation also acts as a barrier to successful joint ventures. Residents fear intergovernmental services will lead to the loss of local government autonomy and unresponsiveness of government to resident concerns. Fear of citizen alienation can be reduced, however, through initiation of a public information program that presents the benefits of intergovernmental cooperation, addresses possible arguments against joint ventures, and proposes procedures for minimizing disadvantages of intergovernmental cooperation (SEMCOG, 2003).

## **CONCLUSION**

The metropolitan Detroit area fits the definition of a standard metropolitan area through its economic interaction; however, social and governmental fragmentation hinders metro Detroit from pursuing opportunities usually available in metropolitan areas. The city of Detroit has a history of segregation that carried over into suburban municipalities and explains the social and governmental fragmentation of metro Detroit today. This social fragmentation has created an attitude of “flight,” resulting in the decay of the central city and surrounding municipalities. And now municipalities in metro Detroit that once thrived due to the industrialization of the city of Detroit are declining along with it.

Municipalities in the metro Detroit area that once separated themselves from Detroit now find their fate connected to the fate of the central city. With the current economic recession, many municipalities find it necessary to create joint ventures to recover from the loss of tax-based revenue. Yet, even in the current economic climate, the history of home rule has created a heritage of municipal independence among government leaders of Michigan, proving to be a barrier to opportunities for intergovernmental cooperation. Although some municipalities may desire to remain socially and politically fragmented, the present economic crisis requires a higher level of cooperation between municipalities in the area, and with this could come limitless opportunities for enhancing interactions between municipalities of the metro Detroit region.

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