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Eric Fazzini, AICP
Willene Green
Christopher Gulock, AICP

City of Detroit
CITY COUNCIL
LEGISLATIVE POLICY DIVISION
208 Coleman A. Young Municipal Center
Detroit, Michigan 48226
Phone: (313) 224-4946 Fax: (313) 224-4336

Derrick Headd
Marcel Hurt, Esq.
Kimani Jeffrey
Phillip Keller, Esq.
Edward King
Kelsey Maas
Jamie Murphy
Analine Powers, Ph.D.
W. Akilah Redmond
Laurie Anne Sabatini
Rebecca Savage
Sabrina Shockley
Renee Short
Floyd Stanley
Thomas Stephens, Esq.
Timarie Szwed
Theresa Thomas
Ashley A. Wilson

TO: Detroit City Council

FROM: David Whitaker, Director 
Legislative Policy Division

RE: Understanding the Impact of I-375 Construction

DATE: September 20, 2023

Councilmember Mary Waters requested LPD provide a report addressing questions relative to the proposed new construction of I-375. The following represents our response to this request.

1. How many people (both black and non-black) were displaced by the original construction?

Estimates vary, at the height of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley there were an estimated 130,000 people living in the area. The predominately black area was poor, and the majority of the properties housed renters in substandard living conditions. There was a severe housing shortage and many of the dwellings in the area housed groups of people, sometimes comprised of both immediate and extended family members. Many of the homes in the area took in borders who were unrelated to the primary occupants, children, and families with children. Unfair housing practices of the time, often did not allow children as tenants. These living arrangements make it difficult to determine the total number of people living in the area at the time of displacement.

The removal of people from the area was not a sudden event, it was more of a gradual well-planned process. The plan to eliminate Black Bottom in the name of urban renewal and slum removal was contemplated long before the groundbreaking of I-375, in 1955. In the early 1940's,

prior to the Federal Housing Act of 1949, which provided funding for the full urban renewal efforts and the emergence of Detroit's public housing, city leaders announced The Detroit Plan.

The project was to be carried out entirely with local funds, and the city had already begun to acquire land when the National Housing Act was enacted in 1949. ¹ An area of 82 acres, later enlarged to 129 acres, was selected. The area was deteriorated, as much of Detroit's 2500 acres of slums were. However, the site was ideally situated, it was close to the Central Business District; two federally assisted projects were going to be built around it; public and semi-public institutions were in or near it; it was bordered on three sides by major traffic; thoroughfares; adequate services were either already or soon to be available.²

When the displacement of people in the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley areas began, relocation assistance was not even a remote option for the vast majority of those affected. There were tens of thousands of persons displaced. A recent publication from Detroit Future City states the Detroit Commission on Community Relations calculated that 10,000 structures were demolished and 43,000 people (70% of whom were black) were displaced by Urban Renewal in Detroit. ³

2. How many of the displaced people were homeowners? How many of those were black?

Mayor Albert Cobo elected in 1950, campaigned on the pledge of keeping black people from moving into white neighborhoods and confined to concentrated areas. The Black Bottom community, largely made up of black renters, was razed. The process of removal was less complex because it was already a concentrated neighborhood that could be easily wiped-out. Business owners, for the most part, received no compensation⁴ Renters received no relocation assistance and were forced to move into public housing or already overcrowded adjacent neighborhoods with substandard living conditions.

The community was replaced by a middle class set of townhouses, and high-rise apartments and condominiums units, current day Lafayette Park. By October 1956, Pavilion Luxury Apartments broke ground. Construction of the I-375 portion of the Chrysler Freeway followed in 1959, effectively killing Hastings Street, the business thoroughfare that bridges Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.⁵

Officials condemned the homes of 7,897 people- 92% of those displaced were renters who received no compensation. It is safe to assume that the vast majority of the displaced who were renters were of African American descent. ⁶ Records indicate, in the 20-block area of Black Bottom cleared for freeway construction, only 36 of the approximately 2000 homes were owner occupied.⁷

¹ Gratiot Redevelopment Urban Renewal Project: Detroit Michigan, Jile G Elfishawy, December 14, 2022

² Jean Marie Erneq, Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, Urban Renewal History of Detroit 1946-1970, 1972

³ The figure represents urban renewal across Detroit, not just Black Bottom and Paradise Valley "A Call for Reparative Investment in Black Bottom Paradise Valley", Detroit Future City, August 2023)

⁴ The Destruction of Detroit's Black Bottom, How the zeal for Government project housing killed a prosperous black community in Detroit, Howard Husock, March 2022

⁵ Ken Cole, Detroit's Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, What Happened? Two lost African American communities. How can history be restored, October 5, 2017

⁶ Detroit Free Press, How Detroit destroyed Black Bottom, built Lafayette Park, July 2021

⁷ Daniel Jin, Maya Suparkasa, Myles Zhang, Mapping the displacement of Historical Detroit: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, University of Michigan, Rackham Graduate School, 2022

3. How many businesses that were managed/owned by African Americans were eliminated in the original construction?

By 1942, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, the Black commercial district located immediately north, housed an estimated 300 African American owned businesses- bars and restaurants, doctor's offices, barber shops, hair salons, hotels, and drug stores- were in operation and all were eliminated.⁸

4. What is the estimated financial impact in the African American community in Detroit in lost wealth from the destruction of Black Bottom?

The effects of segregation, racial housing covenants and other discriminatory policies and practices denied those blacks living in Black Bottom the right to home ownership which is a primary component in the creation of generational wealth. Additionally, the destruction of over 300 black owned businesses without compensation eliminated another means of obtaining generational wealth.

It is difficult to predict what would have become of the financial legacies which could have been handed down by homeowners and black business owners of that time. It is safe to say that all those persons displaced by the condemnation and destruction of the area; renters, and business owners suffered a loss that would negatively affect their family's ability to accumulate and transfer wealth for generations to come. We are not sure how monetary value could be associated with this tragic loss of wealth in today's dollars.

5. How many current Detroiters are estimated to be descendants of residents of Black Bottom, and how would that best be determined?

As people move between states, cities, and smaller communities, the residential status of persons residing in Detroit is subject to frequent fluctuation. To the best of our knowledge, this information remains unknown currently. However, records do exist from the Detroit City Directory from the 1950's indicating addresses of homes to be demolished in the area and the identities of the heads of household.⁹ Perhaps this information could be helpful in tracking descendants.

6. Who owns the land that is currently the freeway- is it the City, State, or Federal government?

The land that is currently the freeway is owned by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). The Federal Highway Administration also maintains an interest in the property because federal transportation funds were used for the original land purchase and project.¹⁰

7. In the plans to turn I-375 into a surface road, who would then have ownership of the road and the surrounding land?

Ownership would remain with the Michigan Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). However, the surrounding land would go through a disposition process. The project will create excess real property in the surrounding area. FHWA approval will be

⁸ Detroit Historical Society, Encyclopedia of Detroit, Paradise Valley

⁹ Daniel Jin, Maya Suparkasa, Myles Zhang, Mapping the displacement of Historical Detroit: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, University of Michigan, Rackham Graduate School, 2022

¹⁰ Jonathan Loree, Senior Project Manager for MDOT, Phone Conversation, July 2023

required for the potential release of limited access right of way (LAROW) that was secured using federal funds for transportation purposes during the original freeway construction. Some of the LAROW will be relinquished to the city of Detroit for city street connections.

MDOT has stated that they plan to commit the value of the remaining excess real property to fund community projects addressing Historical Environmental Justice (HEJ) and Social Equity (SE) concerns. ¹¹

8. What plans are there, if any, to leverage the new surface road to help redress the adverse impacts that the freeway had for nearly 70 years on our community?

In 2022, MDOT and the Federal Highway Administration published the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). This is issued when environment analysis and interagency review through the environmental assessment process finds that a project has no significant impacts on the quality of the environment. The Community Enhancements Plan is part of the FONSI and establishes a series of strategies designed to address the originally constructed freeway's historical Environmental Justice (HEJ) impacts. The plan will be developed by the Local Advisory Committee and recommended to the I-375 Board in the design phase of the project with opportunities for the public to participate.¹²

It is estimated that the project will produce 25-31 acres of highly valued vacant land. This land would be prime for development. Mayor Duggan has stated that black businesses today should benefit from the "enormous development opportunities" the project will bring. ¹³

¹¹ I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project (michigan.gov)

¹² I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project (Michigan.gov)

¹³ Bridge Detroit: Detroit's I-375 project to bring highly valued real estate- who gets it, May 3, 2022