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Magazine

Photograph by Edwin D. Custer

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East Village

Magazine

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Essay

Dilemmas face new Charter Commission

By Paul Rozycki

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Now that the members of the Flint Charter Commission have been elected, they all deserve our thanks for taking on what could be a long and difficult task.

Creating a new charter for the city won't be easy under any circumstances, but with Flint's problems and history it will be even more challenging.

On one level the commission's job seems fairly straight forward—create the basic structure of city government. Do you want a strong mayor or a city manager? How big should the city council be? When should the members be elected? For how long? What powers should it have? What appointments should the mayor be able to make? How should the budget be developed? But behind these basic 'nuts and bolts' of government, there are major issues that require an ability to balance many contradictory ideas and visions for Flint's future.

Trying to balance those may be the biggest challenge for the newly elected commission. Consider some of the difficult choices they face.

First, we need to have a government that can live within its financial means—which is now greatly limited by our reduced population and declining tax base. We need to cut back on the size of city government. It's probably wiser to scale back on services now so we don't overpromise and have to explain why we need to cancel a service later when the money isn't available. Can we cut services without further driving people from the city?

But if we expect people to stay in Flint we need to offer a competent government that can effectively deliver the most basic of services — police and fire protection, clean water, good streets and roads and dependable garbage and recycling services. None of those services are inexpensive. All will require greater tax revenue from a city already facing high tax rates. Will higher taxes cause more people to leave Flint?

Second, the process of writing the char-

ter should be open and involve the whole city. One of the major problems we face is the feeling that many are left out of the process and don't trust those in power. A series of public forums and meetings might instill confidence in the commission and its results. The public process should make every attempt to include all the city, not just those who are regulars at public meetings.

But some of the best discussions and decisions are made in private. Juries don't deliberate in public, neither does the Supreme Court. At least some of the final discussions for the new city charter should be in private. Members of the committee should be able to deliberate, change their minds and modify their views without feeling the need to grandstand for an audience and without being accused of flip-flopping.

Third, the new city government needs to reflect and represent every part of the city. Should we have many wards and elect the council from those wards so everyone has a voice? Should the elected mayor and council have most of the power?

Yet those different voices need to be able to work together as a unit and draw upon the best expertise in the city. Should we elect our officials at large so only the 'best' are chosen, wherever they happen to live, even if that leaves some parts of the city unrepresented? Should a professionally trained city manager have most of the power?

Fourth, the city needs to recognize its strengths and resources and build on them to truly reflect the fact that it is the center of Genesee County. Local control should be important.

But Flint also needs to cooperate with other area governments to a degree that it hasn't before. The suspicion and distrust between Flint and the out county will take a long time to heal and will require both sides to surrender some autonomy. Neither side can afford to be insular.

Fifth, we shouldn't be afraid of change. We are a very different city than we were 40 years ago—smaller and less prosperous. We should be open to experimentation and be willing to discard old ideas. We should welcome new ideas and new residents.

But we should preserve our past and

(Continued on Page 7.)



Photograph by Edwin D. Custer

New life for “Chevy in the Hole” unfurls

By Andrew Keast

With phase one now in progress, the city of Flint has begun to realize plans for the creation of Chevy Commons, a state park downtown along the Flint River on land once occupied by the “Chevy in the Hole” manufacturing complex.

Phase one redevelops 16 of the proposed 60 acres between Chevrolet and Glenwood avenues. The new landscape will include trails through open fields and woods, all planted on a cap of new soil varying in depth from 2 to 10 feet. The cap will be comprised of about 40,000 cubic yards of soil brought in from other sources and a top layer of 11,000 cubic yards of compost produced from local yard waste collected by the city between 2009 and 2012.

Sixty-acre site

While plans have been proposed for the entire 60 acres, the project will be completed over time in multiple phases as funds become available. Phase one is expected to be completed this fall, with the park open for recreation as early as November.

Project Manager Ryan Londrigan, of A.K.T. Peerless Environmental and Energy Services, describes the new park as “first and foremost an environmental project,” a brownfield restoration that will provide opportunities for public leisure as an additional bonus.

The Phase one design includes two main

trails, both ten feet wide, along with a parking lot and two paved patio stages with benches. As locals have come to enjoy the region’s trails and other public spaces, park designers say they hope the park’s connections to trails already popular with hikers will generate interest.

“Spokes” to other trails

According to Londrigan, these connections will resemble spokes of a wheel, with the Genesee Valley Trail, the Flint River Trail and the Grand Traverse Trail all coming together at the site.

At a celebration and launch of the first major steps April 17, Mayor Dayne Walling recognized the attention given by designers to sustainability, environmental quality and community building in their cultivation of an “open space along the Flint River that will be enjoyed by individuals and families for generations to come.”

Walling was joined by U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow; Congressman Dan Kildee; Deb Cherry, Genesee County Treasurer and Chair of the Genesee County Land Bank; and Susan Hedman, Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Region 5.

Walling celebrated that residents soon will have access to the park, whose creation he said has been a “difficult” process, made possible by the Great Lakes

Restoration Initiative, political support and especially the Environmental Protection Agency.

Diverse input

Londrigan describes the plan as a collaboration, whose engineers and designers” allowed their work to be guided by vocal representatives from dozens of local organizations, such as the Crim Festival of Races, the Land Bank, the C.S. Mott Foundation, Kettering University, and the Genesee County Chamber of Commerce.



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Partnerships propel Grand Traverse revitalization

By Ashley O'Brien

A neighborhood plan focused on the two central goals of improving home ownership and improving housing conditions in the Grand Traverse area is progressing actively, according to Heidi Phaneuf, president of the Grand Traverse District Neighborhood Association (GTDNA).

Among other proactive steps, several community partnerships are helping propel the two main goals of the plan, first developed in 2005-2006.

In a recent interview, Phaneuf said that Genesee County Habitat for Humanity, one of the GTDNA community partners, has helped stabilize the neighborhood by building new homes on vacant lots. In addition to bringing in new homeowners, she said Habitat has been making the neighborhood less dense by building one house on two adjacent vacant lots.

Live-work projects opening

Habitat for Humanity is also developing two work-live projects, at 608 and 706 W. Court Street. A live-work building consists of businesses on the first floor with living spaces on the second floor for new entrepreneurs.

Margaret Kato, executive director of Genesee County Habitat, said the two projects will be completed this year. The project, which began May last year, was delayed during the permit process, but is now moving forward. One building will house a photographer/event planner while the other will house a table top gaming business.

The Habitat partnership has been critical, Phaneuf said.

"Habitat for Humanity applied on behalf of the neighborhood for the My Neighborhood Program [from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA)] which gave us training opportunities and additional resources to support neighborhood redevelopment," she said. While that program didn't result in "hard dollars," the partners have been able to leverage the training for other resources from the MSHDA.

Phaneuf said the GTDNA also received help from another association partner, Court Street Village Nonprofit Housing Corporation. Norma Sain chairs the events committee for the association. The events committee has been focused on promoting more resident involvement in the neighborhood association. Sain is coordinating summer neighborhood block parties that will function as informal meetings.

Phaneuf added that anyone who is doing work in the community is a community partner.

Communities First, Inc., for example, made national news last year when it renovated Oak School into Oak Street Senior Apartments. The \$5.1 million development resulted in 24 apartments, 6 of which are barrier free. Every unit is occupied. Communities First, Inc was founded in 2010 by Glenn and Essence Wilson.

"Communities First did a great job," Phaneuf said. "We used to have keys to the school to care for it, and we were dedicated to preserving the building and wanted to see it reused. Every neighborhood that has a large school wants to see it used."

Currently Communities First, Inc. and GTDNA are collaborating on renovations at the long vacant Swayze Apartment building. "Swayze is a cool-looking historic building, and we're glad someone is saving it because we've lost a lot of those buildings in the neighborhood," Phaneuf said.

Communities First, Inc. also is building another small apartment building west of Swayze Apartments. The two buildings will have a total of 36 units available for mixed use, which will include apartments for homeless and special-needs residents. GTDNA is assisting with MSHDA applications for the nonprofit agency.

River City invests in mill

River City, a development company owned by Ridgway White, president of the C. S. Mott Foundation, has also bought property in the area. Most recently, the agency bought the historic Old Burroughs mill at 416 Grand Traverse St.

Phaneuf said that investment in the area is a sign that things are improving. "It means that a responsible developer has some interest in doing things in the neighborhood."

The neighborhood association has helped to create that interest, she said. "Because we've been proactive, and we've tried to build good relationships with our neighborhood partners. It really shifted in a positive trajectory in the last 10 years."

For Phaneuf, 35, the work is personal as well as professional. A Community Resource Planner at the Genesee County Land Bank, she lived in the Grand Traverse neighborhood as a child, moving back into that same house as an adult, for a total of 17 years.

A total of six generations of her family have lived in the house, including three at present.

Park upgrades coming

In addition to housing, the neighborhood association plan also aims to improve outdoor spaces like Memorial Park. It takes up

four acres bounded by Grand Traverse, Fifth, and Church Streets.

Unlike city parks, the Memorial Park is owned by Ballenger Trust. Bill Ballenger, an executive at GM, left Memorial Park, along with Ballenger Park, to the community with funds to maintain them for the public. Trustees at First Merit Bank manage the funds to maintain the park, but the trust doesn't earn enough money for investment, Phaneuf explained.

She noted a 2009 community project resulted in a playground at the park. "The playground is really special to us. It's been a couple years. We're ready for some more improvements," she said.

The neighborhood association put together a master plan for the park, and in February received a \$5,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Flint for a pavilion. By mid-June this year, the park will have a pavilion and six picnic tables.

Habitat for Humanity will help with the design, and neighborhood residents will take on the construction.

Spring Grove gets boost

Another important project in the neighborhood is Spring Grove Wetland Restoration. Located at Second Street, west of Ann Arbor Street, Spring Grove is a natural spring with ground water flowing at about five gallons per minute all year, Phaneuf said. It harbors lots of wildlife, including osprey, deer, red fox, and muskrats. Spring Grove is owned by the Genesee County Land Bank and maintained by the GTDNA as part of a vacant land lease agreement.

GTDNA has been working at Spring Grove for many years but recently got an extra boost.

Flint Tool and Die, a GM factory just a block away, chose Spring Grove as a site for volunteer work. Employees built benches for the area and installed an osprey nest at the top of a Consumer's Energy power pole, according to Phaneuf.

While the neighborhood is providing positive access to the outdoors, it's also battling an invasive species.

Phragmites, a tall weed grass, is "infiltrating our wetlands through an abandoned rail line next door," said Phaneuf. GTDNA regularly holds clean-up days to battle the weed.

The efforts of GTDNA are nearly all volunteer, with some support staff provided by Habitat for Humanity. Phaneuf said GTDNA members quickly realized, "It's so hard to do neighborhood revitalization if you are just a neighborhood group. You need development partners."

Starstruck: Longway Planetarium reopening May 30

By Nic Custer

After recent renovations, Longway Planetarium will reopen May 30 as the state's most advanced and largest planetarium. The planetarium replaced a 14-year-old projection system this past winter with a new Digistar 5 system, a new sound system and new seating.

The \$1.9 million renovations were funded by a \$400,000 capital campaign and a \$1.5 million C.S. Mott Foundation grant. Longway is still raising the last \$50,000.

IMAX-quality and 3-D

Buddy Stark, planetarium manager, said the new system will replace a much more complicated one. He said the planetarium's old Digistar 2 system involved a cathode ray tube (CRT) projector, which produces black and white dots and lines to simulate stars, as well as 60 slide projectors connected to the network. Twelve of these slide projectors would be used to make a panoramic still image around the dome.

The new system, which includes two new Christie Boxer 4K projectors, will provide IMAX-quality images and video. Stark said one of the initial showings at the planetarium will be a repurposed IMAX film from National Geographic, titled *Sea Monsters: A Prehistoric Adventure*.

The new system also is capable of projecting 3-D models in real time. This could allow someone to give a lecture using a 3-D model of the human heart, for example, as part of the presentation.

The space will provide barrier-free access, an LED lighting system and a 15,000-watt Dolby 7.1 digital Surround Sound system.

Plusher seats

One of the major changes to the planetarium is that it will have half as many seats available. Stark said the planetari-

um's 280 concentric seats were replaced by 130 bigger, more plush seats, which provide more leg room.

"When it was just a planetarium, concentric seating made sense but with IMAX film, the audience needs to all face the same way," Stark said.

He noted that outside of the annual Holiday Walk, the planetarium rarely filled all of its seats.

Although the outside dome hasn't changed, the inside has been tilted 7 degrees so audience members don't have to tilt their heads up as much to see a show. It also will make full dome films easier to view. The work inside the dome also appears more seamless than it previously did.

New director

Stark, who ran the Michigan Science Center's planetarium in Detroit, was hired to run Longway Planetarium in November. He said he was attracted to Flint because of the Digistar 5 and because the renovated planetarium will be superior to the one in Detroit.

One drawback of the renovation is the loss of the laser show projectors. Stark said with the new system, they don't need the old projectors because it can replicate the laser effects fairly well. He said the laser systems are more neon than the Digistar 5. There has been a little push-back about the loss of laser shows and Stark said if people keep asking for it over the next year, they will look into purchasing a new laser system.

First Friday events

Beginning June 5, Longway will also start a first Friday event each month that will alternate between a guest speaker and another kind of activity. This includes a "choose your own adventure" evening and a trivia night, where participants are asked questions about astronomy, nerd culture and general trivia. The first Friday events begin at 6 p.m. and include a free planetarium show at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$6 for adults and \$4 for seniors and children.

The planetarium's first show when it reopens will be *Perfect Little Planet*, to be shown at 10 a.m. followed by additional shows throughout the day and activities including face painting, solar observation, balloon art and other family-friendly events. All activities will be free.

Visit SloanLongway.org for more information.

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... Dilemmas

(Continued from Page 3.)

build on the success of those who came before. We've developed a lot of good ideas and we should keep them.

Sixth, as important as the city charter is, Flint's revitalization will probably arise from forces beyond the government. The old Flint was built by the auto pioneers Billy Durant, C.S. Mott, Charles Nash, David Dunbar Buick, William Ballenger and others a century ago. Most of the decisions that created the old Flint were made outside the halls of government. Those actions created the auto plants, along with 80,000 jobs that fueled the city's growth for much of the last 100 years.

Similarly, the decisions to close the auto plants and erase most of those 80,000 jobs were also made in corporate offices, not in city hall. While government had its impact, it's hard to imagine that one particular form of city government or another would have made much difference in either case.

Yet the city government must be willing to create conditions to encourage the same kind of growth that built the city a century ago. Will encouraging that kind of private investment give too much power to the Uptown Development group at the expense of others?

In the final analysis, the charter commission has a task much greater than just writing a new city charter — there are lots of textbooks for that. The real challenge will be to balance a series of conflicting ideas and make them work.

And perhaps the main idea underlying the new charter and Flint's future is the kind of leadership we choose. Dedicated, intelligent and competent leaders can make most systems work well. Incompetent, uninformed and aimless leaders can ruin any system.

In the end, no system can guarantee one set of leaders or prevent the other.

That duty rests with the voters.

Paul Rozycki is a professor of political science at Mott Community College. He has lived in Flint since 1969 and has been involved with and observed Flint politics for many years. He is author of Politics and Government in Michigan (with Jim Hanley) and A Clearer Image: The History of Mott Community College.

... Gardening

(Continued from Page 8.)

her sons carried the table over to my garage — though small, it was heavy in the way of handmade things. Too many braces for the legs, too many nails, but indestructible. I stack my garden tools on the handiwork of an Italian gardener.

Carmie takes a walk in the afternoon, when it's not too cold — the village pattern of generations. On summer Sundays the family gathers at her place, offspring and their offspring, and sometimes a dog.

If there's a birthday, there are more cars and it's noisier. I love it. Laughter and some of the talk drifts my way as I fertilize the roses in my backyard. When the men sit outside on the deck, they sometimes call out in my direction. "Hey, don't worry about our shouting — we're just having a good time." I shout back that they are a joy to hear. Swear your socks off. Have another beer. It's beautiful.

And it's all just beginning in May.

Teddy Robertson grew up in Mill Valley, California, but has lived in Flint since 1984 and in Mott Park since 1995. She is a retired UM-Flint professor. Her work can also be read at <http://teddyrobertson.blogspot.com>.

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- **Three-bedroom townhouse** on Avon near Kearsley St. for lease in July. Laundry, appliances, garden plot, \$595 per month plus all utilities.

Village Life

Gardening revives the spirit, knits neighborhood together

By Teddy Robertson

The trees are leafless sticks but the mottled grass grows greener every morning. Birdsong pierces the gray light of 4 a.m. By 7 a.m. robins and starlings bob and poke on the grass. Chipping sparrows, song sparrows, and common finches swoop across the hypotenuse from the porch eaves to living room gables. High in the bare branches cardinals chortle and

Falling Softly

By *Gracey Scholt*

Chewed up forests, bitten by
the million cross-cut saws
that brought them slowly.

softly down,
crushing limbs,
breaking boughs
like bones

Spring rain softly
falling on the slips of grass,
the bright green
lips of earth
that wait, that wait
for sun's warm
kiss, kiss
kiss

Fingers feeling softest blush
of infant skin, wet with balm
so lately warmed
with mother's blood
so new
so good

Till falling softly
through the spheres
all drop at last into
the drear,
the depth
of earth's sweet calm
as soft as silk
as sleep

Gracey 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 and from Pages Bookstore in downtown Flint. A personal narrative of the poet's life in Europe in the early 1950s, Vienna, Only You, is available from the author at gscholt09@comcast.net. The author's new book of poems, Night Song, is available from Friesen Press (www.friesenpress.com) and Amazon.

tilt their heads as if to hear better.

It's May.

I've packed away my 10,000-lux light therapy device, my shield and buckler against winter depression. Bulbs have straggled up, never as bountiful as the Dutch promise. No matter; I'm on to Burpee's now. Gardening season has finally come.

Time to peek under the crumbling corners of the Styrofoam cones that cover the backyard roses and see if any tiny green leaves have sprouted on the canes. I will scrape back the remaining straw that covers two raised beds and learn how the strawberries have fared.

Then comes serious inventory, clinical assessment. I will troop the yard and inspect, imaginary clipboard in hand – the gardener's triage. I will note the dead, the reviving, the remotely hopeful. Treading the damp grass my feet sink unevenly when I cross a mole runway beneath. Summer struggles with scalopus aquaticus ahead. A non-protected mammal and formidable opponent.

Gardening knits my Mott Park neighborhood together. Our master gardener, Ginny Braun, buys seed geraniums in April that volunteers will plant this month in the four neighborhood flower beds.

The neighborhood honors gardeners and gardening. Every summer Mott Park applauds the prettiest garden and the most improved garden each with a \$100 award. We have so many new neighbors – renters leaseholders, land contract residents. I want to tell them put a geranium in a pot and we love you. You could win for most improved garden.

Meantime, we old-timers garden to please ourselves. We revive our spirits with gardening, nourish our bodies with something fresh out of our own ground, even if the carrots are oddly shaped, the lettuce bears teeth marks, or the abundant kale proved bitter. Gardening connects us with life.

And with history. I read once that Louis XIV worked on building and garden projects for Versailles to the day he died at age 77. Warfare, diplomacy, and domination of Europe for la gloire of 17th century France? A mere sidebar to his real passion – building and landscaping. Gardens were outdoor rooms, integral to architecture. The tarnished panes of silvered glass in the Hall of Mirrors look shabby today, but the regiments of trees and shrubs and splotches of color within the hedged gar-

dens are still breathtaking.

In eighteenth-century America, gentlemen farmers envisioned a republic where endless land promised a self-sufficient agrarian future. In *Founding Gardeners*, author Andrea Wulf documents the lifelong interest of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison in crops and gardening. Founding a successful republic entailed laying out its boundaries and planting it to advance public and personal goals.

Not by accident were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson land surveyors. Their daily concerns included species and crops for the new land they were settling (having wrested it from native peoples who merely foraged it). They warded off invasion and drafted a constitution while they wrote home to their estate managers about what to have planted. Their agrarian idyll rested on slave labor, the contradiction that would undo it.

In the 1890s American magnates built edifices to wealth attained otherwise – in transportation, industry, and finance. They erected enormous homes imitating European styles and crammed their rooms with furnishings ordered from abroad. The Vanderbilt brothers, Cornelius II and George W., hired landscape architects to plan the gardens of their estates. But Gilded Age ostentation sank with the Titanic.

You can visit the Newport mansions and Biltmore House if you can manage hours of viewing imitative styles. The real value? The rare trees and shrubs imported for The Breakers in Newport and the thousands of native azaleas gathered for the Biltmore gardens.

And here we are – ordinary folk with our yards and gardens. My next door neighbor is Italian. Gardening seems to come naturally to Carmie. She tears ivy off the brick walls and tosses the vines onto an old bedsheet spread out on the ground. Then she tips the sheet into the big paper bags for garden trash. Grass cuttings and fall leaves get the same treatment.

In the late afternoon we water our back yards and talk through the chain link fence. Carmie's father was a gardener who grew tomatoes. He built things too. One year she had a garage sale to clear out stuff from her parents; I eyed a low table, painted white, and two small push brooms. All looked homemade. One of

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