

East Village

Magazine

December 2019

Photograph by
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Commentary Three budgets, three deficits, three crises?

By Paul Rozycki

***“Flint’s ‘comeback story’ at odds
with its bleak fiscal outlook”***

—Chad Livengood, Crain’s
Detroit Business, Nov. 10, 2019

***“Dismal finances place future of
Flint Community Schools in doubt”***

—Mark Bullion, WJRT, Nov. 5,
2019. “With budget issues looming,

***“Genesee County looks to sell
Lake Huron property; With budget
issues looming, Genesee County com-
missioners ask departments to cut
budgets by 10%”***

—Ron Fonger, *MLive*, Sept. 6,
and Aug. 27, 2019.

As we move beyond celebrating the last election and into the next one — ponder those headlines. They say a lot about the challenges facing both the elected officials and the citizens of Genesee County, the City of Flint, and the Flint Community Schools. All three are facing major financial and budgetary challenges in the near future.

The full details are more than one can include in a brief column, and the stories behind the headlines deserve further readers’ attention. Some of the problems are worse than others. Some of the causes are similar. And there are major differences in the three. But here’s a short summary.

Flint’s finances

Just a few years after ending state oversight and emergency manager supervision, many experts feel that the city of Flint is on the verge of another financial crisis. Sheldon Neeley, Flint’s newly elected mayor, has said he is working to avoid insolvency and bankruptcy, but “I have to know what I’m dealing with first.” For that reason, one of his first actions has been to bring in Eric Scorsone to do a

financial audit of the city. Scorsone is an associate professor at Michigan State University and director of the Center for Local Government Finance and Policy at MSU. He has been a deputy state treasurer as well as the state Senate’s chief economist. He will head Flint’s finance department on a temporary basis.

What that audit uncovers remains to be seen, though an initial November report identified a \$20 million balance in the city’s water fund. While it’s impossible to summarize Flint’s complex financial problems in a single column, some of the key issues include:

- A city pension fund that is only 36 percent funded, down from 53 percent just six years ago.
- Increasing pressure on the pension system as more employees retire and fewer new workers take their places.
- Spending \$1.7 million more than they will receive in taxes this year, with future deficits running as high as \$2.78 million by 2023.
- A genuine fear that the city could again face state intervention or bankruptcy.

Loss of tax base

The causes of Flint’s financial problems are many, but certainly the major problem is the loss of the city’s tax base. As 70,000 GM jobs disappeared, so did the tax revenue that went with them. Over the last decade or two, the city has lost nearly two-thirds of its tax base through loss of income tax and decline in property taxes.

To make matters worse, as property values have increased after the financial crisis of 2008, tax revenues have not increased proportionately. Under Michigan law, property taxes can rise no faster than the rate of inflation. So if property values increase by 10 percent, and inflation is two percent, tax revenue rises only two percent.

As the city’s population has declined

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Cover: Winter arrives at Clover Beach County Park



Photo of the Month: Unused Central High School retains architectural beauty even as it deteriorates
Photograph by Edwin D. Custer

City Council Beat *Water shutoff fee removed, city administrator and EAB reps approved*

By Tom Travis and Luther Houle

A \$75 fee for water shutoffs in Flint has been eliminated by unanimous vote of the Flint City Council.

After the vote on ending the fee, proposed by Councilperson Eva Worthing (9th Ward), the audience of about 50 applauded.

Worthing explained, "I'm a single mom ... I have my parents, though, and they help me when I struggle. If I didn't have them and I needed to pay \$75 for a shut-off fee and another \$75 for a turn-on fee, I wouldn't have it. I don't have \$150 in my bank account."

She continued, "We've got to find a way to pay for our water without hitting the poorest of the poor, especially when they're down ... Basically it's a poor tax."

In discussion before the decision, Rob Bincsik, director of the Department of Public Works, said last year there were 7,615 water shut offs — meaning a potential loss to the city of the \$75 fee, totaling \$571,125.

Typically, the fee has been charged along with an additional \$75 to turn the water back on, meaning it costs \$150 to get water flowing into a home again after a shutoff. The \$75 turn-on fee is being retained for now, though council members expressed openness to ending that fee someday as well.

Tamar Lewis, the city's chief financial officer, explained the reasoning behind the fee. "I don't like the fee ... however, there is a reason for the fee and it does cost the city money to shut people off."

Worthing and council vice president Eric Mays, who chaired Monday's meeting, had previously worked together to pass another water bill proposal for residents trying to get their water turned back on. That change decreased the amount residents have to pay from 50 percent to 10 percent of the former balance to have their water turned back on.

"This is something very positive

for our residents," Mays said, to another round of applause.

Mays (1st Ward) chaired both the Special Affairs Committee and the council meeting. Newly elected council president Monica Galloway (7th Ward) was absent as was former Council President Herb Winfrey (6th Ward).

Clyde Edwards approved as city administrator

During the nearly five-hour meeting the council also approved Clyde Edwards as Mayor Sheldon Neeley's pick for city administrator on a six-one vote, with Mays dissenting. The council also appointed two new members to the Ethics and Accountability Board (EAB).

According to the new charter, city council is required to approve the mayor's pick for city administrator, a position formerly held by Karen Weaver-appointed Steve Branch.

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... Council

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Mays moved to postpone the motion to approve Edwards' appointment explaining he would rather wait until the whole council, including Galloway and Winfrey, were present.



Clyde and Corrine Edwards
(Photo by Luther Houle)

That motion lost six to one.

When Mays made the motion to postpone there were rumbles and murmurs of disapproval from the audience. Mays said, "I'll remind the audience that Sgt. (Tyrone) Booth is here to keep the peace."

(After the meeting, Booth told *East Village Magazine (EVM)* Mayor Neeley has requested new Police Chief Phil Hart to assign an officer to all city council meetings, a practice that had been suspended during the Weaver years.)

Joseph Pettigrew and Zack Lessner



Joseph Pettigrew
(Photo by Tom Travis)

were unanimously appointed to the Ethics and Accountability Board. Pettigrew was nominated by Eva Worthing (9th Ward), and told *EVM* he hopes to help bring unity to the city. Pettigrew grew up in the Flint area, and as Worthing introduced him, she stated he is very involved in the community.

Lessner, a Flint native and realtor who with his wife runs a vintage clothing business, appeared before the council at its last meeting. He was nominated by Allan Griggs (8th Ward).

Security camera requirement for business proposal discussed

City Council conducted the first reading of an ordinance that would require many Flint businesses to install security cameras.

Thirteen types of businesses would be subject to the ordinance, including pharmacies, alcohol-related businesses, hotels, gas stations, convenience stores, and carry-out restaurants.

Several businesses would be exempt, including businesses not regularly open to the public and businesses approved by the chief of police to use alternate security measures.

The ordinance states that if a crime is believed to have occurred, the business must present footage to the police department.

Council opinions on the proposed ordinance were split. Maurice Davis (2nd Ward) supported it, stating, "With the way the crime rate is going, and the type of crimes, we got to do something ... We don't have the manpower, so why not utilize the technology?"

Kate Fields (4th Ward) voiced reservations. "This particular thing requires that certain businesses — and it's almost every business in the city — have to buy a minimum of three cameras, and I don't know if we can legally mandate that they do that ... supposedly all of this information was going to feed into the police intelligence service."

Fields continued, "I want to hear from some people in the ACLU about the right to privacy. For example, will this be on your doctor's office? Planned Parenthood? Is that an invasion of privacy? Are they going to know when you go in to see a divorce lawyer?"

The ordinance was proposed by the former Mayor Weaver's administration. Council decided that, considering the recent elections, the Neeley administration should have a chance to decide whether to submit it to council, and to make any necessary changes. It was postponed in a five-two vote with Allan Griggs (8th Ward) and Fields dissenting.

Finally, Mezon Green, during public speaking time, came to the podium and presented Mays the clown outfit she had famously donned at last month's meeting to express her disdain for some of city council's behavior.

Mays gleefully accepted the clown outfit, except the rainbow skirt. He took the red nose, the fuzzy wig and the polka-dot bow tie. He laid them on the chairperson's desk as he was chairing the meeting. He lifted up the clown outfit pieces toward the end of the meeting during a contentious debate with Fields. Addressing her, Mays appropriated Mezon Green's quote from the last meeting: "When you clown, I clown."

EVM Staff Writers Tom Travis and Luther Houle can be reached at: tomntravis@gmail.com

Lead/galvanized tainted pipes replaced so far in Flint: 9,448

Numbers provided by pipeline contractor ROWE Engineering are posted at cityofflint.com under Fast Start Replacement Program. Totals as of Nov. 15 were **24,304 pipes excavated** (wording changed to "explored" since returning to the "predictive model") and **9,448 replaced**.

The city aims to have all of Flint's lead-tainted service lines replaced by 2020.

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Neurodevelopment Center for Excellence marks one year of helping Flint kids

By Teddy Robertson

January 2020 marks the first year of operation for Flint's Neurodevelopmental Center for Excellence (NCE), a service of Genesee Health System (GHS) for neuropsychological assessment of children impacted by Flint's water crisis.

But while the Center may be just one year old, GHS visualized its need five years ago, according to Dr. Lauren Tompkins, vice president of clinical operations.

As Genesee County's public mental health provider for over 50 years, GHS — like the medical community — was very aware of the dangers of lead exposure and its harm as a neurotoxin.

"When the Genesee Health System first began interfacing with the community over the water crisis (in 2014-2015), the state asked what we would like to see done," Tompkins said.

"We had a long list, but one item was to provide neuropsychological testing for children exposed to lead to assess consequences for brain development, behavior, and learning support needs."

Public mental health and lead

GHS has provided assessments for autism since 2014 (when the Medicaid benefit began) and in 2017 added diagnostic testing for fetal alcohol syndrome. Well-integrated in the community, and with established assessment services, GHS was the logical choice to provide specialized lead screening. With neuropsychological testing, "we could at least get a baseline and reassess over time," Tompkins said.

"Initially, the idea seemed impossible because it would take so many resources," she continued. "We provided a guess for what we might need, but estimating resources for such a large population over time is very difficult."

Fast forward to January 2018: two crucial events emerged in Flint water recovery. First, the Flint Registry's pre-enrollment opened. Second, Michigan's American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), New Jersey Education Law Center, and White & Case LLP filed a

class action lawsuit against three state and local school entities [Michigan Department of Education, Genesee Intermediate School District, and Flint Community Schools] on behalf of Flint children exposed to lead.



(Photo by Teddy Robertson)

The goal was to compel the state to provide the resources needed. Expert testimony from a neuropsychologist made the case that children needed specialized comprehensive screening beyond the scope of school testing. Ideally, all Flint children would be screened to pinpoint need. ACLU of Michigan then approached GHS about providing a lead screening resource.

"Child Find Laws" and educational needs

ACLU focused on Michigan's "Child Find Laws," or the state's obligation to identify children's educational needs, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Failure to identify children meant non-compliance and violation of children's rights.

In the spring of 2018, the case was settled for the plaintiffs and the funds became available: \$3 million allowed the startup of the Neurodevelopmental Center of Excellence (NCE), an expan-

sion of GHS assessment services for autism and fetal alcohol syndrome.

In October 2018, NCE began accepting referrals for lead exposure testing, and in January 2019, NCE became fully operational. Located in Hurley Medical Center's eastside campus building, NCE shares the facility that houses the GHS clinic for autism and fetal alcohol syndrome testing: 2700 Robert T. Longway Blvd. at the corner of Dort Hwy.

To offer screening for potential lead exposure to hundreds, potentially thousands of children, GHS and NCE needed to develop "a clinical model that would maximize the benefit to the impacted community," Tompkins said. The NCE staff is comprised of two licensed psychologists (LPs), highly qualified, doctoral-level professionals in pediatric neuropsychology (with post-doctoral training and fellowships) together with six master's degree-licensed psychologists (LLPs) trained in psychometry. The LLPs do testing and scoring; the LPs do interpretation and explanation to parents.

What is specialized neurodevelopmental testing?

Lead does not impact identically across populations. The amount of exposure, the length of time, age and developmental condition are all factors. NCE does not draw a straight line between lead and children's difficulties; too many other social determinants could be involved. "While there's no single profile, children are at higher risk, so specialized screening and early identification are crucial," Tompkins said.

Going beyond the psychoeducational testing in schools, specialized neurodevelopmental screening looks at all aspects of brain functions from the comprehensive cognitive standpoint: memory, attention, impulse control, problem solving, ability to communicate, and information processing.

"With a very large lens we look at the child across the board," said Dr. Katherine Burrell, associate director for

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assessment services at NCE. “Where are they in their current functioning? We look at social/emotional, cognitive, academic/learning, language, memory functioning, visual/spatial skills.”

The goal of testing is to obtain best help here and now. For a struggling child, the pivotal point is where they go from here. That is why, for Burrell, “the recommendations are the most important.”

Models, or re-inventing the wheel

Sketching the standard model for lead testing, Burrell described a daunting outpatient process, typical of national sources using lengthy standard assessment batteries. The usual practice relied on a screening packet containing:

- a form to schedule the testing
- directions to return the completed forms
- a description of what to expect — six to seven hours of testing
- information for a return visit for a feedback session

That’s it.

But such a routine was unlikely to work in Flint — a population with literacy issues and without trust. “We know that families cannot do a traditional six-to seven-hour assessment,” Burrell said. NCE modified their assessment down to four hours. Still, at the outset there were no-shows. “We tried to figure it out, and it seemed to be lack of trust,” she said.

Some way to connect with the community was needed.

Enter the Family Navigator

A way to connect with the Flint community came through GHS’ experience with paraprofessional staff called “family navigators.”

The story of the family navigator starts with the January 2016 Emergency Declaration for Flint that opened the door to federal aid.

A one-year grant from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services, or SAMHSA, allowed for emergency case management services through Community Outreach and Family Support (COFS), a

part of GHS. Six Flint contract employees were hired — people who lived in Flint and experienced the water crisis themselves. Some had been working with other projects and community organizations, so they had “lived experience.” They contacted people, going door to door, to learn about their needs and identify children in order to coordinate support recovery.

Elizabeth Burtch, manager of COFS, described the value of the family navigator as a lesson learned from the success of SAMHSA grant experience.

“Many are parents themselves, long-time Flint residents, most often from ‘people professions’: pharmacy tech, cosmetologist, hair stylist — good with people, care about others and can talk to them,” she said, adding that the navigators provide an invaluable connection with the Flint community.

Subsequent grants, especially from local foundations, continue to fund the navigators who today are a paraprofessional team of 10 working from 30 to 35 hours per week. Their caseloads can go up to 60 families, although not all need the same amount of time. Some families need a daily check-in, others less frequently.

In November 2016, the Flint Medicaid Water Waiver allowed the state to provide “targeted case management,” or individual assistance, for those eligible.

Because GHS is the designated provider for waiver benefits, each family that comes through the waiver program is assigned a navigator, in addition to a licensed professional, through COFS.

Waiver sessions include information about NCE screening for children. Even if parents decide not to pursue NCE assessment, the navigators can help them connect with school resources and the educational process.

The “fabulous” family navigators

Since they were introduced in March 2019, family navigators have become “a first point of contact on the ‘front end,’” according to Burrell. “As locals who have lived through the water crisis themselves, they are part of the community and they provide a wraparound service. They go into the home, if the family elects that, do a water assessment, and

can be present at screening to establish medical necessity for assessment.”

The NCE family navigators schedule and participate in home visits that take about two hours. They can learn about family needs for community resources. Most often, families need better housing, a problem even before the water crisis. As Burrell noted, “the family navigator enters the home and sees holes in the ceiling where the family lives. This is the reality.”

During the neuropsychological screening at the clinic, which averages about four hours, the family navigator may check in with the parents who are waiting. When the feedback session with the neuropsychologist takes place, the family navigator can be present as the results, diagnoses, and recommendations are shared.

When recommendations based on preliminary data are shared, the navigator can be present as well. The navigator can also participate in meetings with a school Individual Educational Provider (IEP), assist in obtaining mental health help or outpatient speech therapy.

The navigators follow the family through the entire process.

Both Burtch and Burrell called the family navigators “fabulous,” and their on-the-ground experience has helped shape the work of both COFS and NCE.

NCE and the schools: multiple systems at play

Referrals to NCE come primarily from physicians, lawyers, the Flint Registry outreach team (which accounts for one-quarter to one-third of referrals), and the schools.

“The principals are burdened,” said Tompkins. “In the schools we seek out lead, or key, teachers. We can shore up the school system’s intense behavior support needs — it’s a shared responsibility with mental health.” At the same time, she said, “We are working more closely with schools to develop referral protocols and how to describe the results and recommendations with families.”

When an NCE assessment recommendation suggests that the child have an Individualized Educational Program, or IEP, in school, parents must follow the school process: submit a written request on

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... Neuro

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behalf of the child for a Special Education assessment. Then the school must follow through with its own testing.

Since August and September, referrals to NCE have spiked, according to Burrell. Now there is a waitlist for assessments. In addition, “at first we tended to get the obvious cases, but now we are getting more complex cases, which take more time.”

With wait time for an NCE assessment increased, it is important that the school supports be put in place if possible for the child until neurodevelopmental testing is completed.

“The schools seem open to working with us; neuropsychological test is just one way to help the schools adjust services, but it will be an ongoing process with what’s being provided in the interim and after results are provided to meet the children’s needs,” Burrell said.

Because school psychoeducational testing augments neurodevelopmental testing, schools can help by accepting and respecting the results. With regard to assessments, “we fill the void in school systems; we fill the gap,” Burrell said. “Everyone has the same commitment to families,” she emphasized, “but all institutions have their own systems — it’s the challenge of multiple systems at play.”

In the meantime, the demands on Flint schools are enormous. Tompkins noted that examination of the first NCE 100 tests showed that approximately two-thirds of those tested were receiving some recommendations for intervention. Special education in Flint schools is strained to the breaking point.

The power of feedback

NCE screening is all about function, and its recommendations are about the future of the child. The post-screening session when recommendations are shared with the family are the most crucial part of the process. Burrell described these sessions as “powerful and amazing, very emotionally charged, often marked by a sense of gratitude.”

Validating the parents’ feelings supports them to go forward. More rarely,

anger can emerge, but the task of NCE is to validate parents’ feelings, to reframe their situation.

Burrell emphasized, “All these families have been through trauma. They’ve had to restructure their lives to accommodate this event — live with family elsewhere, get water — all the efforts they’ve made to cope. We can show how their persistence has brought them to this point and [provide] a feeling of what they have achieved here.”

NCE can be the first point of rebuilding trust with the community. “When parents get what they need, trust begins to build,” said Burrell. “It’s clear that NCE is not just testing; it’s about the community and the child as a whole. We designed around the families and are still changing, ever evolving to make things easier for families.”

Challenges and optimism

As 2019 closes, challenges for NCE remain — continued recruitment of neuropsychologists to come to Flint, the slowness of Medicaid reimbursement, the need for additional financial supports. Adequate housing still remains the number one challenge for many families who use COFS.

Flint-area pediatricians are still learning about NCE assessments as GHS reaches out with information. Success in all these areas would help position GHS and NCE for the re-testing of children in

two or three years.

Still, the energy for the coming year at NCE is palpable. Said Burrell, “I did not realize how many committed people wanted to help. The level of commitment has been eye-opening. When you find people like that you know you have a good work force.”

Recently, Newark officials inquired about NCE and the Flint Registry. “Perhaps,” Burrell reflected, “we will lay the way for others, to show a way how a community comes together.”

EVM Staff Writer and columnist *Teddy Robertson* can be reached at teddy-rob@umich.edu.

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THIS MONTH IN THE VILLAGE

"This Month" highlights a selection of events available to our readers—beginning after our publication date of Dec. 5. It is not an exhaustive list, rather a sampling of opportunities in the city. To submit events for our January issue, email your event to us by Dec. 24 to pisenber@gmail.com.

Tai Chi Fall 2019

Now through Dec. 14

Thurs. and Sat., beginners at 9:30 a.m., intermediate at 10:30 a.m. and advanced at 11:30 a.m.

No classes Oct. 24 and 26 and Nov. 9, 28 and 30.

McLaren Hospitality House

G-3170 Beecher Rd., Flint

Cost: \$105 for Fall Session and drop-ins

\$6 per class.

Contact Chi Force Tai Chi at 810-348-6530.

"Into the Woods"

Dec. 6, 7, 8 and 13, 14 and 18

Fri. and Sat. at 7 p.m.,

Sat. and Sun. matinees at 2 p.m.

The Tony Award-winning musical by Stephen Sondheim puts a dark comic spin on familiar fairy tales. Recommended for ages 13 and up.

Flint Repertory Theatre

Elgood

1220 E. Kearsley St., Flint

Admission: \$20 reg., \$18 seniors and teens,

\$16 child (12 and under)

For tickets and more info visit flintrep.org.

"Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope"

Dec. 6-21

7-9 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays

2 p.m. Saturdays

Micki Grant with "almost the black equivalent of a flamenco show, ... a mixture of a block party and a revival meeting." Conceived by Vinnette Carroll.

The New McCree Theatre

2138 W. Carpenter Rd., Flint

Admission: \$5.

For more info visit thenewmccreetheatre.com.

Nutcracker

Dec. 7 and 8

7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday

Flint Symphony Orchestra, dancers from the Flint School of Performing Arts and guest artists from Collage Dane Collective and the Washington Ballet perform Tchaikovsky's classic piece.

The Whiting

1241 E. Kearsley St., Flint

For more info visit thewhiting.com.

Tickets: \$10-\$40 depending on section

Flint Second Friday ARTWALK

Dec. 13

6-9 p.m. Friday

Various locations on and around Saginaw Street Downtown Flint. Visit Greater Flint Arts Council at 816 S. Saginaw St. for the walking tour.

For more info visit geneseefun.com.

Admission: Free

OHL Flint Firebirds Hockey Game

Dec. 13

7-10 p.m. Friday

Watch Flint Firebirds battle Saginaw Spirit.

Dort Federal Credit Union Event Center

3501 Lapeer Rd., Flint

Tickets: \$12-\$16

For more info. visit flintandgeneseec.org

or flintfirebirds.com.

Holiday Movies at the Capitol Theatre

Dec. 13, 18 and 20

7 p.m.

Disney's "The Santa Clause" shown on Friday,

Dec. 13, "White Christmas" shown on Wednesday,

Dec. 18, and "A Christmas Story" shown on Dec. 20.

The Capitol Theatre

140 E. 2nd St., Flint

Admission: Adults \$10, Children 12 and under \$3.

Admission for Genesee County Residents:

Adults \$5, children 12 and under free.

Up to four children free with each paying adult for Genesee County Residents.

For more information visit capitoltheatreflint.com.

Flint Community Read

Dec. 14

11 a.m. to 1 p.m. second Saturdays each month.

A group of residents will present book discussions and "seek to engage the community in dialogue and strengthen the Flint community by promoting inclusion and understanding about differing points of view." The book is *What the Eyes Don't See* by Dr. Hanna-Attisha.

Sylvester Broome Empowerment Village

4119 Saginaw St., Flint

Admission: Free

For more info call 810-232-2526 or visit

facebook.com/CommunityReadFlint/.

Victorian Christmas Tea

Dec. 14 and 21

2-4 p.m. Saturdays

Enjoy a choice of tea and Christmas-inspired finger sandwiches and cakes amid festive Victorian-era decorations and floral arrangements.

Whaley Historic House Museum

624 E. Kearsley St.

Admission: \$30 per person

Advance booking required through

Eventbrite or email

Director@WhaleyHouse.com.

Christmas at Crossroads—Holiday Magic

Dec. 19-22

4-9 p.m. Thursday-Sunday

"Thousands of lights sparkle like tiny stars throughout the village with live entertainment, model trains, holiday music, costumed villagers making vintage crafts, shops full of great holiday gifts, and Santa." Plus, ride the Huckleberry Railroad.

Crossroads Village

& Huckleberry Railroad

6140 Bray Rd., Flint

For ticket info visit geneseeparks.org.

It's recommended that you purchase your Huckleberry Railroad train tickets early since the tickets sell out early.



“The weight of an entire community” Mott Foundation execs talk “Focus on Flint”

By Harold Ford



Ridgway White (with Santa) and Kimberly Roberson: “We realized we had blinders on”
(Photo by Harold C. Ford)

Editor’s note: *The following is an interview with the C.S. Mott Foundation’s Ridgway White, CEO and president, and Kimberly Roberson, Flint area program director. Also present at the interview was Kathryn Thomas, vice president for communications. After release of a 24-page Focus on Flint report, the Mott Foundation announced availability of \$1 million in grants for projects to improve Flint neighborhoods. The foundation accepted ideas through Nov. 30.*

Harold Ford, East Village Magazine (EVM) staff writer, conducted the interview Nov. 14 in the Mott Foundation offices. The responses have been lightly edited for ease of reading.

EVM: What drives you to want to continue to support the Flint community?

White: “First and foremost is the mission, the history, and the roots of the foundation. The Mott Foundation was formed by C.S. Mott [White’s great-grandfather] over 90 years ago and Flint was his adopted hometown. I’m now fourth generation Flint; I live just outside of Flint. Growing up, we identified with Flint, we worshipped in Flint, we worked in Flint.

We have many friends who live in Flint and we all call Flint home.” [White’s father, longtime top Mott Foundation executive, died Oct. 9.]

Roberson: Roberson grew up in Grand Blanc and now lives there. “My father worked downtown (and) we worshipped here (in Flint), I went to Flint U of M, so I’ve always thought of myself as a Flint girl.

“The commitment that the Mott Foundation has had to Flint over time is so steadfast and certain. I’m really proud to be part of a long-term commitment of that nature. I like the direct nature of the Flint work. I like the fact that it’s about real people right now and how this community can change and be a bigger part of its future. I’ve had opportunities to work on some of our other portfolios ... but my heart always comes back to the Flint work.”

EVM: Do you grow weary of the “Flint ruin porn” stories, the stories that highlight the negative underbelly of Flint?

White: “Without a doubt, we’ve listened to people from outside of Flint tell Flint’s story for decades. That’s been exasperating in the last five years since the inception of the water crisis.

What we felt was important was to create a publication that told the facts in Flint, but also surveyed residents to tell what they’re feeling, what they’re thinking ... to create statistics at an approachable level ... what people are doing to improve their lives ... We also thought that it could be a community springboard for thought and action ...

“The Mott Foundation has been rooted in, what my father would say is, ‘shoe leather philanthropy.’ We like to get out in the community ... Sometimes it’s important to check how we’re doing that. We connect with grantees, connect with the people they’re serving. This was an effort to get to every single resident to have no barriers to the input people can provide to the staff of the Mott Foundation and myself personally ... We did almost 30 community convening sessions and the majority of those were 15 or less people.”

Roberson: “Ridgway was very adamant about *Focus on Flint* being honest. However it came out was what we were publishing. There wasn’t an attempt to massage anything. It was a direct portrayal of the data and the community residents’ response(s).”

White: “In the wake of the water crisis, we took our entire team and

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... White

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stepped back for a second and asked, 'How (do) we judge our own success?'" And we said, 'We can no longer judge our success based on an individual grant and the outcomes of that grant.'

"We have to think about the collective whole of our grant making and the community that we're serving. And that success for us would not be achieved until a person that's born in Flint has an equal opportunity as a person that's born in another (more prosperous) community.

"And so, that's been a tough thing. It's a lot of weight to have the weight of an entire community. And it's probably not fair.

"We realized we had blinders on ... We took the blinders off and said, 'We have to think about a one-source water solution. We need to think about water from the source all the way down to the last mile, and last 10 feet, and how water quality affects everything that we do. And it's important for the basic living standards of humanity.' Three or four years ago in the water crisis, we changed how we graded ourselves ..."

EVM: Flint has a new mayor who says he intends to return Flint to the Karegnondi water system. Do you support that move?

White: "There are many important grants the Mott Foundation has made. Probably the most important in recent history was the grant to the city to help reconnect to the Detroit water supply.

"Back in September of 2015, I'd been president of the foundation for nine months; I was appointed president Jan. 1, 2015 ... Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha had just come out with the results of her study (about) the elevated blood levels of children in Flint and that the water was the source. I was sitting in my office listening to that and said, 'We've gotta do something.' ... I said, 'I've gotta call the governor, and I didn't really know the governor ..."

(White said he went to his computer and Googled then-Governor Rick Snyder's help line number. He called the number, talked to about 10 people in an attempt to offer help.)

"Eventually, the governor called me back on his cell phone from California ... we talked and I said, 'Look, we know two things right now: Number one, the science says if you reconnect to a consistent flow of water, with proper anti-corrosives, in six to 12 months the water will revert to its pre-crisis levels. I said it's going to take 12 months to come up with an engineering plan for the right solution, so we should do that now.

"Second, people were pretty fearful, and rightly so. I believe that anger can be channeled but fear was really dangerous. We were pretty close to massive civil unrest. Those two things motivated us to keep the community together and to relieve fear."

Subsequently, the foundation contributed \$4 million and the city contributed \$2 million to leverage \$6 million from the state legislature.

"The idea was that it was only going to cost \$12 million until we were able to switch to Karegnondi," White said.

White declined to say whether or not the Karegnondi pipeline or GLWA (Great Lakes Water Authority) should be the source of Flint's water.

"Number one, we should have safe water; we should have trusted water. Safety equals trust. Number two, the water should be affordable. The thing that

got us in the water crisis in the first place was that we had the most expensive water in the country, and we still do. And that's not right, to have one of the poorest communities in the country have the most expensive (water) as well.

"We have spent the last couple of years doing an analysis of a tiered water rate system that would make water rates more affordable for residents in Flint. We've completed one study that says it looks positive, that it could actually save residents money, and save the city money. We're completing a second study ..."

White said he hopes to share study findings with residents within the next six months.

EVM: How did Flint get to this spot, from a town of 200,000 to a town of less than 100,000, from an affluent community to one with significant poverty?

White: "The macroeconomic headwinds facing Flint for decades have been extreme. The water crisis is something that happens when entire communities have been discounted for decades.

"It is an example of environmental racism. It's really troubling. When you're a one-company town ... and the one company pays such high wages, there's not a lot of incentive to go out on your own and

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... White

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create new work ... If you think about invention for Michigan, the quickest pay — whether you've created an automated windshield wiper technology or an iris-scanning thing — is to sell it to General Motors, to sell it to the automobiles ... but we haven't expanded.

"I think you're going to see a shift of that. We've gotta figure out how to invest in industry in the right ways, how to make Michigan competitive. And that's focusing on K through 12, focusing on our higher ed, focusing on a more diversified economy. Flint ... when you're the number one town in the country, you take it for granted.

Look at New York City; they turned down Amazon ... That's crazy ... I don't know if that's what was occurring in the '50s (in Flint), but certainly there were some systems that were created that were unsustainable.

How we got to where we are here, a one-company town, one employer, strikes ... Race certainly had a lot to do with it I would think ..."

Roberson: "It seems like it was a perfect storm that impacts communities like this. We have had an accumulation of all the hits like all the cities that are prone toward systemic racism issues. It seems like we have struggled with pretty much all of them along the way here."

Editor's note: The final part of the interview included questions based on specific components of the *Focus on Flint* report that can be accessed online.

EVM: Is there any piece of data that surprised you in the section "If Flint Were a Village of 100"?

Roberson: I wasn't actually surprised by the "Median Home Value" (Flint, \$27,400; U.S., \$217,600) but that's one of the things that looked the starkest ... I think some of Ridgway's original intention was to see some of this data together and you think about it a little differently with those comparisons and a bigger picture.

"We have talked a fair amount about

the smartphone and broadband connection question as well, just in terms of educational issues, and the library ... It's clear that more of our folks have a car than have internet access."

White: "Another big challenge is that, when you look at the entire report, there are so many programs here to help people. So how do you properly reach people so that programs aligned to help people and kids are being utilized?"

EVM: Were you surprised that "Arts & Culture" was rated the highest at 3.6 (on a scale of 1, lowest, to 5, highest) in eight "Aspects of life in Flint" categories?

White: "I was surprised it wasn't a little higher. I think it speaks to utilization."

EVM: Fewer than 4,000 of Flint's 15,000 school-age children attend Flint Community Schools (FCS). Are you worried about the viability of public education in Flint?

White: "Yes. I'm worried that the 15,000 kids in Flint aren't receiving quality education regardless of the choice they make. The bulk of the charters are at or less (in test scores) than the local public (schools), that the kids who are choosing schools of choice are not making it to any school that's at or above the statewide average ... We've gotta figure out how to provide quality education. One of the key things the governor could do ... is to say charters have to meet or exceed the state average ... We have the belief here that not all kids have the ability to choose."

Roberson: "We're worried about the under-4,000 that are at FCS ... but they're not the only ones we're worried about. It's not about a district; it's about our kids. They're being served more broadly."

White: "We've invested millions of dollars in Flint schools ... We've done a lot of work. It hasn't worked. We're cognizant of that.

"Right now, the state has in place a partnership agreement the Mott Foundation was originally a signatory to. We weren't excited about it because we didn't feel it had enough of the support items needed to properly serve the kids in Flint built into it.

"And so they've asked us to re-sign it ... and we've elected not to re-sign it at this time.

"And the reason for that is not because we don't support the Flint Community Schools, but we feel the state needs to do some fundamental changes on how to help Flint Community Schools."

Subsequent to the interview, Kathryn Thomas, Mott's vice president of communications, provided EVM with the following statement:

"The Mott Foundation has granted nearly \$64 million to and in support of Flint Community Schools since 2013."

EVM: Is Flint a college town — with its 22,000+ college students — akin to Ann Arbor and East Lansing?

White: "I don't know if we're 'akin to Ann Arbor' but with 22,000 students, we're certainly a college town. Can we do better on creation of a full student life experience? Probably. Everybody can always do better. Kettering and Mott Community College, and UM-Flint are terrific. I think they've got good leadership at all of them right now. And I'm excited to see the future ... They have the ability to provide the highest quality education to local people, but beyond that serve the state, the nation."

Roberson: "I think it is an increasing part of who we are — that college town feel. I don't know about 'akin to Ann Arbor'; that maybe makes the bar too high. I think it definitely is what fills some space when we're not a GM town anymore."

EVM: On housing, would it be appropriate to conclude that creative entrepreneurial efforts to remove blighted buildings is a fairly high priority in your *Focus on Flint* project?

White: "That's been one of the repeated areas of interest and focus from people in the community. What we've heard is that people are concerned about: number one, neighborhoods and blight; two, safety; three, economic development, jobs, and core education.

"One thing we heard more than blight removal is, 'How do you continue to have a sense of community even if you remove all the blighted houses?' We have a focus

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From marathon to moving meditation

By Teddy Robertson

It all began with a New York City police officer.

Michigan-native Gloria Kramer was an accomplished 5K, 10K, and half-marathon runner when she realized she wanted something more than what she got from a good run. Living in Florida where she worked as a registered dietitian, running had been her avocation.

"I was in my thirties," Kramer says. "Meditation was becoming popular and I was interested, but I had a heck of a time just sitting still and clearing my mind."

That's where the policeman came in.

Kramer saw an ad for a tai chi class and the instructor turned out to be a police officer from New York who'd given up his career to teach tai chi. Kramer learned Yang 24, a "form," or set of traditional tai chi movements created in China in 1956 to bring the benefits of tai chi to the masses.

"Tai chi is 'moving meditation,'" Kramer says, "It gives your body and mind a chance to connect. I liked the physicality of it, plus the mental aspect."

Kramer continued her tai chi instruction with Hilmar Fuchs, a renowned German martial arts master headquartered in Florida. She describes Fuchs as phenomenal teacher; tai chi really "resonated with me," she says. Kramer was hooked.

But life happens. Kramer and her family (now including an infant daughter) returned to Michigan. She searched for a teacher, but never found someone equal to Fuchs.

Fast forward several years and life intervened once again. Kramer's daughter turned six and wanted to learn karate. The karate studio offered parents the option of watching their kids' classes or participating themselves for the same cost. Guess what?

Kramer learned along with her daughter and eventually obtained a sec-

ond degree Black Belt in Tang Soo Do, Korean-style karate.



Gloria Kramer
(Photo by Teddy Robertson)

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... White

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on community schools, but when you go from 43 (schools) down to nine, can the community schools be the center(s) that serve 15 to 20 neighborhoods?"

Roberson: "We heard people say, 'We just wish we had a coffee shop. It (the neighborhood) just doesn't feel like a place anymore.' The blight is a part of it; it's not the whole equation in terms of what we [Mott Foundation] have just listened to. People want a neighborhood, and a place they belong, and that they have community connections within."

White: "And that's what you lose when you have kids going to multiple different schools — schools of choice, charter, or Flint Community Schools ... that sense of community where you know the kid next door, the people next door."

EVM: Nearly nine of 10 of Flint's children are living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Is poverty the key to

resolving most of what ails Flint neighborhoods?

White: "If I could have a magic wand, I'd wave it at a lot of things. I'd say poverty without a doubt. But people want to be engaged in a broader community. Poverty is important, but you want a sense of purpose. A lot of people want a job and purpose or volunteerism, something in addition to just relieving the economic burden."

"Maybe that's something only I would say, but people want purpose in life. I'm not saying people in poverty don't have purpose ... A community group on the north end of Flint said, 'The social determinants of health ... are the social determinants of a prosperous and safe neighborhood ...'"

EVM: In 2020, where would you like this project to be?

White: "We're going to continue to do the neighborhood surveys. We're still out on whether we're going to publish a *Focus on Flint* booklet on an annual basis. We're going to continue to track the data,

internally, for sure. I hope that people felt like they've been listened to in the engagement sessions. I'm excited to see what ideas the community comes up with in improving the neighborhoods. We've got a lot of neat ideas already ... a couple hundred ..." White indicated the foundation will utilize considerable flexibility in executing the project.

Roberson: "We're asking people to be as specific as they can be, about organizations, what areas they are serving, so that we can hear them well and find a way to respond to the specifics of what they're looking for ..."

In response to queries from residents about what projects the foundation might be looking for, Roberson said she told residents, "You tell us." She noted workshop participants had very specific ideas about improving neighborhoods. They were not so specific about how to improve education, she said.

EVM Staff Writer Harold C. Ford can be reached at hcford1185@gmail.com.

... Meditation

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“But as I grew older,” Kramer says, “those takedowns and throws are harder on your body.” She returned to tai chi.

At first Kramer practiced qi gong (or chi gong) warm-up exercises and tai chi in the evening to help a cousin relieve anxiety during a stressful time in her life. (Qi gong involves repetitive exercises to stimulate the flow of qi, or energy, throughout the body, whereas tai chi involves a “form,” or sequence, of movements that flow from one to the next that complete an entire set of movements.)

Kramer remembered her cousin’s comment: “You know, you should teach this; you’re really good at it.”

A registered dietitian with a master’s degree in nutrition, Kramer had always enjoyed the teaching she’d done in hospital settings.

Maybe her cousin was right? She should become a teacher herself.

Kramer sought out tai chi instruction online that would prepare her to teach. She began with the program of Vancouver specialist, Dr. Keith Jeffrey, originator of “Easy Tai Chi.” At a weekend session for certification, people told her about Dr. Paul Lam.

A physician and world leader in tai chi for health for over forty years, Lam has promoted tai chi for health improvement from his home in Australia. Lam and his master trainers also teach in the US, annually offering workshops in different states.

Kramer attended a regional workshop in Cincinnati held by Lam’s Tai Chi for Health Institute, and today she is certified in all the Institute’s tai chi forms adapted for different needs: tai chi for health, energy, arthritis, rehab, and diabetes. In week-long intensive courses with Lam’s master trainers, Kramer learned other long forms of tai chi: Sun 73 and Chen 36.

Kramer’s journey toward official teaching began when she offered a class at her karate studio. She went on to teach evening classes for Flushing’s

Community Education. Today Gloria teaches a total of 13 tai chi classes a week in four different locations: YMCA Pierson Road, Grand Blanc Senior Center, Woodhaven Assisted Living, and the McLaren Hospitality House Conference Center (cancer patients take these classes for free). Today 80 adults are learning tai chi in these classes.

Tai chi instruction is challenging. For successful learning, beginners, intermediate, and advanced learners must be grouped to accommodate their skill levels. At Grand Blanc and



Gloria Cramer with tai chi class
(photo by Teddy Robertson)

Hospitality House Kramer teaches the three levels back to back.

Kramer emphasizes that you have to experience tai chi to appreciate its value for health and well-being. “People who manage to complete one month or longer are more likely to stay with the practice than those who take a single class.” For example, most of Kramer’s regular students at McLaren Hospitality House have been attending twice a week for three or four years.

To accommodate people who drop in at the Pierson Road “Y,” Kramer usually teaches one tai chi form twice a week and then chi gong exercises the third day of the week. People often begin with the qi gong exercises and then jump into the tai chi class.

Kramer says she views America as a vast, potential market for tai chi. The variations designed by Dr. Lam and his team show how the practice is adapted for all ages and conditions. Still, “so many people just don’t have access,” she says.

One approach is “working though hospitals . . . a wonderful way to get in touch with people who could benefit.” Kramer would like to get doctors inter-

ested; she has experimented with teaching tai chi to staff in medical offices. “The market is untapped in many different places,” she says.

An adept practitioner of three tai chi styles — Yang, Sun, and Chen — Kramer describes the benefits of each one. When asked if she has a favorite, she replies: “The Chen 36 is mentally challenging but also athletic, Sun 73 is good for relaxing and breathing, and Yang 24 has a pleasant flow.”

Tai chi is rooted in the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang oppositions. Reflecting on this duality, Kramer notes, “yin is water and yang is fire. Tai chi belongs to the spirit of yin in life. Americans tend to embrace yang-type, or active principle movement like aerobic exercise or weightlifting. Everything is so hard and fast. But our minds are very over-active; our life is over stimulated.”

Kramer repeats, “tai chi really needs to be experienced.” While its practice may be hard to explain, the benefits of tai chi are recognized and promoted by the Center for Disease Control, the National Council on Aging, and the Arthritis Foundation.

US medical and health care systems, however, are not geared to offer tai chi or qi gong exercises as a prescription — in contrast to countries like Australia and China.

“We may eventually embrace tai chi for health,” Kramer says, “but we are a long way away from it.”

In the meantime, interest in tai chi grows slowly and Gloria Kramer continues to teach. She muses, “I’ve been thinking that maybe next spring I’ll offer an evening class for working people” — just the audience that might appreciate a bit more yin in their overactive lives.

For more information on the practice of tai chi, contact Chi Force Tai Chi @ 810-348-6530.

EVM Staff Writer and columnist Teddy Robertson can be reached at teddy-rob@umich.edu.

... Three

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by more than half, its expenses haven't decreased as quickly. It still takes almost as many city employees to serve a city of 96,000 as it did a city of 200,000.

With next year's census, the city will most likely show a decline in population. That decline is significant because many federal and state programs are based on the number of people in a city. A loss of population means an additional loss of revenue.

Legacy costs

The most worrisome part of the budget is the rising impact of legacy costs — the costs associated with retired, or about to be retired, employees of a city of 200,000. Those costs are now carried by the fewer employees in a city of 96,000. The city's lack of support for its pension funds has been one of the major causes of its current financial crisis.

In an interview with *Crain's Detroit Business*, Hughey Newsome, who served as Mayor Weaver's third CFO, said the city's pension fund is so "hopelessly upside down" that Flint may face another state takeover, or Chapter 9 bankruptcy, to deal with rising legacy costs.

According to a study by Crain's, Flint pays out \$8 million more in retiree benefits than it spends on police and fire services, parks and recreation, the mayor's office, the clerks' office, the city council, and all other city services.

There are other causes as well. The state has cut revenue sharing for cities in recent years, and blame can be laid at the door of past administrations for the lack of planning as Flint declined. All too many of us expected that Flint would return to the "good old days" as it always had.

Flint Community Schools

The city of Flint isn't the only one facing financial problems. Perhaps even more pressing are the problems of the Flint Community Schools. According to several financial experts, the Flint schools are facing a crisis that could endanger their very survival. As reported in *East Village Magazine* by Harold Ford, the Flint school board was planning on closing four schools by the end of the year.

Only the angry response of those living in the neighborhoods around the schools caused them to delay possible closings. That delay may briefly quiet angry voices, but the financial problems remain.

The cause of the schools' problems are similar to those faced by the city. However, two major factors have made the Flint schools' problems even worse.

Fewer students

The first is a dramatic decline in student enrollment in the Flint schools. At its peak over four decades ago, there were more than 48,000 students in the Flint system and the Flint schools were a model for the nation. As recently as a decade ago there were 13,456 students enrolled. Currently, there are just over 3,700 in the Flint schools.

By many estimates, two-thirds of the K-12 students in the city are enrolled either in charter schools, schools of choice, or private schools, rather than the Flint Community Schools.

As the student numbers declined dramatically, so did state aid. But spending did not. A recent audit by Plante Moran indicated that the district spent nearly \$10 million over its general fund budget in the year that ended in 2018, and that spending for basic programs budgeted \$18 million but spent more than \$21 million. The deficit for the upcoming year is estimated to be as high as \$9 million, and a decision is expected by February to reduce at least some of the deficit.

More special education students

According to Superintendent Derrick Lopez, the Flint schools also have significantly more special education students than the state average. While the state average is about 12 percent, 24 to 26 percent of the Flint Community School students are special ed students, who cost significantly more to educate than traditional students.

An additional problem facing the Flint schools is interest on two loans taken out to service earlier debts and deficits. In 2014, the district took out a loan to resolve a \$21.9 million deficit. The district will pay almost \$2.1 million per year until the year 2038 — about \$450 per student.

Genesee County finances

Financial crisis seems to be par for the course for Flint and the Flint Community Schools — at least recently. For a long time, Genesee County seemed to be insulated from the financial problems of Flint. Not anymore. A report from the controller's office at the end of last summer showed that expenditures exceeded revenue by at least \$14 million, causing the need for the deep cuts on the part of the County Commission. Like the city of Flint, one major source of the county's problems is the increasing cost of retirees' health care and pensions.

As the county faced a shortfall, the County Board has asked departments to cut expenditures by 10 percent. Not surprisingly, the request drew strong resistance from department heads, who didn't want to see their budgets cut.

As a partial solution to the county's financial problems, they are also considering selling some of the property acquired as part of the KWA pipeline project in Sanilac County.

Looking forward

One of the larger concerns is that these problems are taking place while the economy is in very good shape. Unemployment is at a 50-year low, the stock market is at a record high, and wages are edging up (slowly). What will the financial picture be when the next recession comes, and the economy takes a nosedive?

On a positive note, the leaders of all three local governments are taking action, as difficult and painful as it might be. Mayor Neeley is in the process of having an audit done for Flint's finances. The Flint School Board has at least faced the prospect that it will need to close some schools in the near future, even if it provokes a public outcry. And the County Board of Commissioners is also facing the fact that it will need to make some serious cuts, even if it produces angry responses from its department heads.

It could be a long, hard winter.

Political columnist Paul Rozycki can be reached at paul.rozycki@mcc.edu

Village Life

Every day I keep dreaming of Down Time

By Jan Worth-Nelson

I used to crave adventure, no day complete without a conscious tablespoon at least of risky business, a routine to kick-start adrenaline, an agenda to keep me in the loop — the loop of life, baby. I aimed to be a player. If I didn't push my limits a little bit, I lost a dram of self-respect. One time I had a lot to prove and I had a drive to Be There, wherever that was.

I hitchhiked across the country (everybody was doing it back then), I took a small cargo ship to remote Polynesian islands, I drank copious quantities of kava and other potent liquids. I partied with people whose language I didn't understand, I ate fish eyes and tree grubs. I burned my bra in a Southern California bonfire and for a time, stood up for every cause.

And as for my, let's say, romantic life, don't get me started, unless you're prepared to pour the next drink. I'm old now, so to hear the endless tales you'll get bored and embarrassed. In brief, it sort of went like this: I got acquainted with a lot of men. I married a poet I met in a Flint bar. As might have been predicted, I divorced a poet I met in a Flint bar. In between, many dramas and soul-scorching experiences, some undignified and some to salvage dignity. Then I jumped right in and married again — my old friend from those Polynesian years. You know how it goes: a bunch of close calls you wouldn't want your momma to know about ... close calls, good material.

I'm not sure what happened to that girl.

The other night I was ready to cover a news event for *East Village Magazine*: the meeting of religious leaders with Mayor Sheldon Neeley "under The Dome" (might sound inviting, but also pretty unglamorous — that poorly lit, beat-up room, worn-out relic of the Space Age) at City Hall.

For the record, my *EVM* team and I sincerely thought we were invited.

I'd had a long day and spent two hours at the Tom Sumner Show with my chums Paul Rozycki and Henry Hatter — I invariably find at least one opportunity to rant and rave at Henry, my best right-wing friend, there, and he rants back, always intelligently, and then I give him a com-

radely kiss on the cheek as we depart. It works for us.

Then, my backpack loaded up with an extra cord, my phone, my laptop,



pens, notebook, press pass, water bottle, I drove my trusty Honda into the city parking lot, found a spot that made me walk a little ways — for my health — and trundled inside.

Well, it didn't last long. In the crush of big convivial pastors, most dressed in black, I had barely signed in when I got booted right the heck out of there.

"You can't be here! NO PRESS!" the alarmed sign-in lady said. As a preacher's daughter, I'm endlessly curious about men and women of the cloth, and had been looking forward to kibbitzing on their powwow with the mayor, so I tried at least peeking inside to check out the scene. I had just enough time to greet my friend Pastor Dan Scheid, resplendent in Episcopal garb, who said, "Jan, Jan! I didn't know you were ordained!" and I sputtered, knowing my time was short, "Ordained in journalism," and then Neeley's trusty press manager, Marjory Raymer, showed up in a Flint minute and firmly encircled me out of there.

There's a whole case that could be made about this, a sober case about journalism's role and why elected officials shouldn't be meeting with significant groups in private. And then there's also that argument about how people won't say what they really think — to really open up and tell the truth, so it goes, unless it's a closed-door event. Point taken. Forgive my head-slapping naivete, but I thought pastors would tell their truth no matter who

was in the room.

Whatever. I had another point altogether to make about this tiresome anecdote.

I was glad I got kicked out.

It meant that I could tote my heavy backpack back to the Honda in peace, into the parking lot with all the ministerial Cadillacs waiting like a bunch of wordless steeds, and drive home to a quiet evening with my man.

I could fix a ham and cheese sandwich with tomato soup and watch *Jeopardy*.

I could have some down time.

I never get enough.

When I retired five years ago, I thought I'd luxuriate in an endless bliss of free time.

I imagined I'd go days without obligations, overdosing on caffeine-free tea, lolling at the window and consuming all those novels I meant to read. I'd organize my manuscripts, polish off our Family Trust, clear out every drawer, throw away all the clothes I never wear, finally learn about all the perennials in my backyard and pull up all the weeds.

My anthem was the Talking Heads hymn, "Heaven,": Heaven is the place/where nothing/nothing ever happens ... It's a beautiful song.

But then *East Village Magazine* became my life, and now it seems something is always happening. That is Flint, of course — no surcease from the action.

So here I am, rushing from one thing to another every day.

At least the other night I got kicked out of The Dome in time for dinner.

All my life I've been waiting for this thing called Down Time. Maybe I'll get it some time. And I know what I'll do with it: *nothing*.

My husband says that will drive me crazy. But I insist. Right now, *nothing* sounds really good.

May you also have some lovely Down Time in this frantic season — Happy Holidays!

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