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2014

Learning from Detroit

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Book Review: Learning from Detroit

By Michael Lewyn

In *Detroit: Three Pathways to Revitalization*, George Washington University law professor Lewis Solomon focuses on three possible saviors for that city: public education, private investment, and community agriculture. Although his analysis is sometimes incomplete, he does address some topics of relevance to depressed upstate cities such as Buffalo and Rochester.



What's Wrong with Detroit

Solomon begins, quite sensibly, by focusing on what's wrong with Detroit. Detroit's population peaked at 1.8 million in the 1950s.¹ As highways opened up suburbia to development, most of Detroit's middle and upper classes left the city in the second half of the twentieth century. By 2010, the city had just over 713,000 residents,² about a sixty percent decrease from the city's peak population. In the 2000s alone, Detroit lost an additional 237,500 people, about a quarter of its 2000 population.³ One-third of the city's remaining residents earn incomes placing them below the federal poverty level,⁴ and almost half of the city's adults either are officially unemployed or are not in the labor force.⁵ As the national economy contracted in 2008-09, Detroit's already low home values decreased further: in July 2009, the median residential home sale price was \$7,100.⁶ As a result, homeowners have had little incentive to rehabilitate houses in disrepair, and developers have had no incentive to build new homes on vacant land.⁷ Twenty-three percent of the city's homes are vacant.⁸ As a result of these problems, the city is virtually insolvent. Indeed, Solomon understated the city's fiscal difficulties: he pointed out that the city is drowning in debt, but wrote that "the March 2013 appointment of an emergency manager will put Detroit on the path to financial solvency."⁹ In fact, Detroit filed for bankruptcy on July 18, 2013.¹⁰ Its bankruptcy petition is currently in court, so the city's long-term fiscal future is anything but certain.

Solving Detroit's Problems

Even if Detroit resolves its fiscal problems, it will still be a desperately poor city. Solomon focuses on three possible pathways to revitalization: education, outside investment, and urban agriculture.

Solomon points out that Detroit's schools rank "at the bottom of student achievement among America's big cities."¹¹ Test scores are below those of other central cities, and student enrollment has decreased by

more than half since 2000.¹² But Solomon admits that Detroit's poverty adversely affects school performance, noting that "students from poverty-stricken families... find it more difficult to concentrate, to sit still, to follow directions, and to rebound from disappointments."¹³ It follows that the Detroit students' poor performance may be a result of their poverty rather than the school district's inadequacy.

Test score data suggests as much. The National Center for Education Statistics, a federal agency,¹⁴ has created the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), which compares the test scores of twenty-one urban school districts.¹⁵ In 2013, the average reading test score for Detroit's black eighth-graders was 239—below average for the urban school districts surveyed,¹⁶ but above four urban school districts in more prosperous cities (Fresno, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington).¹⁷ When schools are ranked by social class rather than race, Detroit does slightly worse. Of the eighth-graders whose families are poor enough to be eligible for government-subsidized school lunches, Detroit students' reading score (238) is below the big-city average, but above that of Washington and tied with Milwaukee.¹⁸ Although Detroit's children are poorer than those of other urban school districts,¹⁹ their test performance is not the worst.

Thus, it appears that when race and class are controlled for, Detroit's schools may not be as bad as Solomon suggests. If Detroit schools' poor performance is a function of poverty rather than educational incompetence, the city's decline is a cause, rather than a result, of the city's education problem. Therefore, the notion that improved schools will reduce the city's poverty may confuse cause and effect. Instead, it seems more likely that revitalization, if it happens, will eventually improve student performance in school and cause test scores to rise.

What does this likelihood mean for policymakers in impoverished upstate cities such as Buffalo and Rochester? It seems to me that if these cities become more desirable in other respects, improvement in at least a few schools will eventually follow. As cities revitalize and middle-class people return, some of those people will stay in the city even after having children, and some of those parents will be willing to take a risk on urban public schools. If enough parents do so, test scores will begin to rise, causing school reputations to improve, resulting in more parents choosing urban schools for their children. For example, in the north side of Chicago, gentrification has caused some neighborhood schools to have above-average test scores.²⁰

Of course, urban school reform can mean two very different things. "Reform" can mean either making the schools attractive to the middle class, so that parents will not leave the city when their children reach school

age, as has occurred in some parts of Chicago, or improving the education of the poor, so that they have more job skills.

Solomon seems more interested in the latter view of reform but does not explain in much detail what Detroit schools should do differently to reach this goal. For example, he writes, “it is time to rehabilitate vocational (career and technical) education in Detroit high schools to prepare graduates for the new labor markets.”²¹ However, Solomon does not explain how Detroit’s existing vocational schools²² fall short of this goal, nor does he show how another school system has adopted any policies that Detroit schools could profitably borrow.²³

Solomon then goes on to discuss economics, listing a wide variety of businesses that have invested in downtown Detroit.²⁴ However, a list is not a reform. More substantively, Solomon claims that Detroit must “overcome its reputation as a difficult city in which to start and do business”²⁵ without supplying evidence that such a reputation exists. In addition, Solomon suggests that the city should simplify business licensing through “a one-stop public sector website covering all the tax and business license issues...and the consolidation of all subsequent reporting requirements.”²⁶ Although one-stop permitting certainly seems noncontroversial to me, Solomon’s argument would be more persuasive if he explained whether other cities have tried it and whether any arguments other than political inertia prevent this idea from being put into practice.

In addition to endorsing more pro-business policies, Solomon suggests that Detroit turn one of its major liabilities into an asset. Detroit now has an enormous amount of vacant land: forty of the city’s 139 square miles are vacant.²⁷ This problem also exists in upstate New York: Buffalo, for example, has 16,000 vacant lots—more than ten percent of its housing supply.²⁸

Unless Detroit’s population starts to increase again, it seems unlikely that anyone will want to build on these parcels. Solomon suggests a few options, such as allowing the vacant land to revert to nature, or creating parks and farms.²⁹ Solomon asserts that the latter use might be the most useful for three reasons. First, urban agriculture could increase Detroiters’ supply of healthy food, such as fresh fruits and vegetables.³⁰ Second, agriculture could be a source of jobs to Detroit’s many unskilled residents.³¹ Third, if Detroiters consume more local-grown food, they could reduce the amount of energy used in transporting food products.³²

Solomon points out two possible obstacles to urban agriculture in Detroit. First, individuals can lease city-owned land for an urban farm, but only for a year at a time, thus discouraging long-term investment in agriculture.³³ Second, the city’s zoning code does not explicitly authorize agricultural uses, thus creating additional uncertainty.³⁴ Obviously, Detroit should create more specific rules governing urban agriculture.

In these respects, Detroit can learn from Buffalo. Urban agriculture has existed in Buffalo since 2003, when the Massachusetts Avenue Project turned one of the city’s vacant lots into a vegetable garden.³⁵ The city’s new zoning code includes farms as a permissible use in the city’s “light industry” zone.³⁶ In addition, the code will address smaller-scale food-related practices, such as gardens and beehives in individuals’ yards.³⁷ Because Buffalo’s code is quite new, it is not yet clear to what extent farming will increase after the code is enacted.³⁸ In addition, Buffalo does sell city-owned land, and recently has streamlined the process for such purchases.³⁹

III. Conclusion

Solomon’s book is far from a complete guide to Detroit’s problems and the possible solutions to these problems. Nevertheless, his book is useful for someone who might want an introduction to the state of Detroit, and to what people in Detroit are doing in an effort to revitalize the city’s economy.

Endnotes

1. LEWIS D. SOLOMON, DETROIT: THREE PATHWAYS TO REVITALIZATION 3 (2013).
2. *Id.* at 4.
3. *Id.*
4. *Id.* at 8.
5. *Id.* at 7.
6. SOLOMON, *supra* note 1, at 7.
7. *Id.*
8. *Id.* at 5.
9. *Id.* at 23.
10. See Alana Semuels, *Digging into Detroit’s bankruptcy filing*, L.A. Times (Oct. 26, 2013), <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/26/nation/la-na-detroit-bankruptcy-20131027>. For day-to-day coverage of the bankruptcy proceedings, see *Bankrupt Detroit: Continuing Coverage*, The Detroit News, <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/99999999/METRO01/130718001&template=theme&theme=DETROIT-BANKRUPTCY> (last updated Mar. 14, 2014, 1:00 AM).
11. SOLOMON, *supra* note 1, at 66.
12. *Id.* at 67.
13. *Id.* at 75.
14. See *About Us*, Nat’l Ctr for Educ. Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/about/> (last visited Mar. 14, 2014) [hereinafter NCES].
15. See *Mathematics & Reading 2013: What is TUDA?*, The Nation’s Report Card, http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_tuda_2013/#/what-is-tuda (last visited Mar. 14, 2014).
16. See NCES, 2013 Reading TUDA Assessment Report Card: Summary Data Tables with Additional Detail for Average Scores, Achievement Levels, and Percentiles for Districts and Jurisdictions 11 (2013), available at http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_tuda_2013/files/Results_Appendix_2013_Reading_TUDA.pdf (providing that the average reading score for black eighth graders in urban school districts was 246).
17. *Id.*
18. *Id.* at 19. On the other hand, I note that Detroit students’ mathematics scores are worse than those of other cities, even controlling for school lunch eligibility and race. See NCES, *supra* note 16, at 20. Given Detroit’s generally high level of poverty, this may reflect the fact that Detroit’s black and school-lunch-eligible students are poorer than those of other cities. See J.B. Wogan, *Poverty Rates Remain Stubbornly High in Big Cities*, Governing

- The States & Localities (Sept. 24, 2013), <http://www.governing.com/blogs/view/gov-poverty-rates-remain-stubbornly-high-big-cities.html> (providing that 59.4 percent of Detroit residents under 18 live below poverty line, as opposed to 52.6% of Cleveland children, 42.6% of Milwaukee children, 43.4% of Fresno children, and 26.5% of Washington children).
19. See Wogan, *supra* note 18.
 20. See Daniel Hertz, *Chicago: Gentrification Comes to the Neighborhood School*, *Urbanophile: Passionate about Cities* (Nov. 26, 2013), <http://www.urbanophile.com/2013/11/26/chicago-gentrification-comes-to-the-neighborhood-school-by-daniel-hertz/>.
 21. SOLOMON, *supra* note 1, at 75.
 22. Compare Chastity Pratt Dawsey, *EAA announces new program to give Detroit students job training*, *Detroit Free Press* (Aug. 2, 2013 6:04 PM), <http://www.freep.com/article/20130801/NEWS01/308010113/EAA-announces-new-program-to-help-Detroit-kids-get-training-for-jobs> (describing one existing program), with Chastity Pratt Dawsey, *Programs in jeopardy at 5 Detroit Public Schools vocational centers*, *Detroit Free Press* (Feb. 11, 2013), <http://www.freep.com/article/20130211/NEWS01/302110088/Programs-in-jeopardy-at-5-Detroit-Public-Schools-vocational-centers> ("The Detroit Public Schools' five vocational centers offer an array of career preparation and job placements that go beyond the auto shop and cosmetology programs of trade schools a generation ago.").
 23. Solomon does mention something called the Harlem Children's Zone (which combines education with social services) and Turnaround for Children (in which a three-person team works with teachers to train school personnel to deal with mental health issues and minimize classroom disruption). See Solomon, *supra* note 1, at 75. However, he does not explain where these policies have been implemented or whether they have worked. *Id.*
 24. See SOLOMON, *supra* note 1, at 83-116.
 25. *Id.* at 116.
 26. *Id.*
 27. *Id.* at 126.
 28. See *What We Do*, Groundwork Buffalo, <http://www.groundworkbuffalo.org/whatwedo/whatwedo.html> (last visited Mar. 14, 2014) (providing the number of vacant lots); see also *Buffalo (NY) Houses and Residents*, City-Data.com, <http://www.city-data.com/housing/houses-Buffalo-New-York.html> (last visited Apr. 26, 2014) (providing that the city has 122,720 occupied housing units).
 29. See SOLOMON, *supra* note 1, at 127.
 30. *Id.* at 129.
 31. *Id.* at 130.
 32. *Id.* at 131.
 33. *Id.* at 133.
 34. See SOLOMON, *supra* note 1, at 134.
 35. See Maki Becker, *Reaping Urban Rewards: The popularity and plausibility of farming in Buffalo continue to grow as more residents show interest and City Hall considers easing restrictions on it*, *Buffalo News* (Apr. 16, 2012, 12:01 AM), <http://www.buffalonews.com/article/20120416/CITYANDREGION/304169912>.
 36. See City of Buffalo: Office of Strategic Planning, *Buffalo Green Code: A Preview of Buffalo's New Zoning 19* (2012), http://www.buffalogreencode.com/documents/A_Preview_of_Buffalo%27s_New_Zoning.pdf (listing farms as permitted use in "D-IL" zone). See *id.* at 14 (describing D-IL zone).
 37. See Becker, *supra* note 35; see also City of Buffalo: Office of Strategic Planning, *Buffalo Greencode: A New Zoning Direction for Buffalo 16-17* (2012), available at http://www.buffalogreencode.com/documents/New_Directions_Tech_Report.pdf (describing regulations in more detail).
 38. For a more general, nationwide discussion of urban agriculture and zoning, see Nina Mukherji & Alfonso Morales, *Zoning for Urban Agriculture*, 27 *Am. Plan. Ass'n* 2 (2010), available at <http://www.planning.org/zoningpractice/2010/pdf/mar.pdf>.
 39. See Queenseyes, *Post to City Hall is Making it Easier to Buy City-Owned Properties*, *Buffalo Rising* (Apr. 4, 2013), <http://buffalarising.com/2013/04/city-hall-is-making-it-easier-to-buy-city-owned-properties/>.

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