

McTevia Explains How to Fix Detroit in TIME Magazine Blog

Unfiltered: How do you fix Detroit?

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Years ago, I had the good fortune to meet a man named James V. McTevia. Of all the financial advisors I've ever interviewed, McTevia is one of the few I would trust – with money or anything else.

So I was thrilled when McTevia agreed to add his thoughts to the Assignment Detroit blog. Some background: McTevia is the founder of McTevia & Associates, a Bingham Farms-based crisis management consulting firm. Its job is to help companies confront their problems, find solutions and restructure them for the future.

McTevia's 40-year career began in commercial finance, then moved into banking and industrial finance. He is author “Financial Reality” and “Bankrupt: A society living in the future.”

I asked McTevia to answer one question: What will it take to fix Detroit?

Detroit will never be the same. Nor will Michigan.

No one should waste oxygen pondering whether Detroit can “get back to what it used to be.” We need to focus intently, realistically and creatively on getting to a new destination. Together.

One cannot separate outstate Michigan's fortunes from metro Detroit's. Any high-school dropout who drove up I-75 amid the boats and snowmobiles being towed north to cottages owned or rented by blue-collar workers understands this economic hypothesis. Michigan towns that lack even an automotive widget shop are hurting, too.

Meanwhile, if Detroit – and the reeling smokestack economy that stretches to Saginaw and Bay City – is to be a comeback kid, our urban population will have to compete in a brand-new weight division. Pardon the boxing metaphor. After seeing Cinderella Man I often think of Jim Braddock as the ultimate in refusing to surrender despite the worst financial adversity, finding a way to fight against all odds to feed his family, to endure and to prosper.

Detroit taught 20th Century America its two most important economic tricks, one for better and one for worse. How to create an affluent middle class. And how to move from paying cash for a new set of

wheels to taking out a five-year loan (then flashing your credit card at a fast-food drive-through).

The new century finds America spiraling deeper in debt, maxing out its plastic by the trillions, flailing away with no apparent solutions except to rob still more dollars from our great-grandchildren. Detroit and Michigan once again lead the way. In these hard times, we are the hardest place.

That's the truth of it. But as someone who has spent half a century helping individuals and corporations work through the pain of insolvency, I say, yes, Detroit and Michigan can be a Cinderella Man story. But only, as always, with lots of pain.

Yes, the feds need to spend money here (where better to pursue a recovery model?). But let's spend wisely – on jobs that put money in citizens' pockets while producing community projects that will endure for generations and will generate pride . . . unlike Wall Street bailouts pouring trillions into institutions people neither trust nor understand.

Many years ago I lived briefly in Cleveland, and never have forgotten the “Emerald Necklace” of parks encircling the metro area. Chicago's marvelous lakefront is mostly landfill. Does any major city anywhere possess so much acreage where we could invent a new standard for public works?

Meanwhile, Michigan has one of the nation's best and most extensive higher education systems, but with an uncertain future. Why not use the magic of competition to make Michigan the very best at training the young, and retraining the old, for jobs – all kinds of jobs – that will be around in this new century?

That kind of education and re-education never seems to live up to its promise. But it's what we must do unless we want to renew unemployment benefits endlessly. Let's get competitive about training and retraining. If an institution comes up with training programs that work – here – then let's pour all available dollars into them. Anything that doesn't work is something we can't really afford.

We have a new mayor and a new city council. They all appear ready and willing to make a real go of it and not play games. Detroit has always had a shot at being a truly remarkable and wonderful city. I believe we now have a team in place that will get down to business and make the tough decisions that need to be made for the good of the people and not the good of a few.

The people owe it to themselves to support this new regime led by David Bing as they try to move Michigan forward and make Detroit, once again, a key cog in the global economy.