

# Citizens Research Council of Michigan

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## Detroit City Charter Revision

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On November 2, 1993, as provided in the 1974 charter, voters of the City of Detroit will determine whether a charter commission will be established to revise the current charter. This series is being financed in part by grants from Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan, Hudson-Webber Foundation, and Matilda R. Wilson Fund, and NBD Bank.

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### DECENTRALIZATION OF CITY GOVERNMENT

Decentralization of local government refers to a re-organization by moving one or more operations or decision-making responsibilities out of a central city hall and dispersing them into neighborhood areas, closer to the people of the city. It can involve administrative decentralization, in which offices and services are physically moved into neighborhood centers, or representative decentralization, in which policy or decision-making responsibilities are dispersed away from the central city hall. Representative decentralization moves a step beyond ward or district elections of city council members. It involves the creation, through election or appointment, of sub-city councils to make advisory or substantive policy decisions affecting the section of the city served by that council. Administrative and representative decentralization also can be combined.

Decentralization is usually implemented with several expectations. First, it is expected to increase government responsiveness to the desires and interests of the citizens, thereby improving people's perceptions of local government and reducing feelings of political alienation. Decentralization creates a more effective complaint response system. Second, it is expected to expand opportunities for political involvement, thereby creating a stronger sense of community, developing new leadership with new ideas, and strengthening the democratic process. It should allow decision-making to be done in a way that more effectively reflects the desires of the neighborhoods. Third, it is expected to improve the quality of city services by bringing service delivery closer to the people, improving the information flow and changing city employees' attitudes. Finally, by changing the administrative or decision-making

processes, it should increase the focus at the neighborhood level.

#### Detroit Charter Provisions

The 1974 Detroit City Charter introduced provisions on decentralization of city government. The charter defined "communities" and "community councils"; mandated the creation of a decentralization study commission; required a vote of the people to approve any proposed ordinance implementing decentralization; listed the kinds of functions that could be decentralized and provided for the powers and duties that could be delegated to the community councils if decentralization were to occur. The charter provided that:

A community council may exercise any powers and perform any functions within the community service area delegated to it by ordinance, including:

1. Advisory or substantive authority, or both, with respect to such programs as urban renewal, relocation, public housing, planning and zoning actions, and other physical development programs; crime prevention and juvenile delinquency programs; health services; code inspection; recreation; and manpower training; and
2. Self-help projects, such as supplemental refuse collection, beautification, minor street and sidewalk repair, establishment and maintenance of community centers, street fairs and festivals, cultural activities, recreation, and housing rehabilitation and sale.

The charter commission stated that the decentralization provision was introduced to reduce citizens'

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feelings of alienation from government and to bring governmental control and service delivery closer to the people. It is interesting to note that the 1972 proposed charter, which was rejected by the voters, mandated a decentralization commission to propose a comprehensive plan for community government which divided the city into at least eight communities represented by community councils with at least five members per council, while the 1974 version was much more permissive in regard to the actions of a decentralization commission and the structure of any community government.

### **Detroit City Decentralization Since 1973**

As mandated by the charter, a Community Government Study Commission was appointed by the mayor with consent of the city council. Hearings were held to solicit public opinion, information was collected, and other cities' experiences were investigated. "The commission in its January 30, 1976, Final Report concluded that there was "no groundswell of support for the concept of community government in Detroit," that "the benefits of decentralization (improving citizen attitudes, service delivery, information flow, client control and agency attitudes) have failed to justify what were found to be the weighty personal costs of participation" in other cities, and that "public enthusiasm for decentralization as a cure for urban government problems has been declining on a national level since the late 1960s." Based on these findings, the commission concluded that it would be ill-advised at that time to draft an ordinance proposing the establishment of elected community councils in Detroit. No subsequent actions have been taken to move the city toward decentralization.

### **Decentralization Experience**

Many large U.S. cities and school districts have experimented with decentralization. Large geographical jurisdictions have a natural tendency to incorporate some elements of decentralization.

Boston created "Little City Halls," New York City created "Neighborhood Councils" in city government and implemented school decentralization, Washington D.C. experimented with "Advisory Neighborhood Commissions" and Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Kansas City, and many other cities

have implemented some form of decentralization. While the goals of decentralization may be desirable, cities and school districts have had trouble moving effectively from generalities to specifics and from theory to practice. It has not been tremendously successful in any of these cities.

Detroiters have had some experience with decentralization of city government. Fifteen citizens district councils allow Detroit neighborhood residents to advise the city on issues of planning in their community. First authorized in 1968 as an amendment to the Blighted Areas Rehabilitation Act, these councils act as liaisons between the residents and the administration in deciding how federal block grant money should be spent. In addition to this experience, there are lessons from the experience of Detroit Public School decentralization that are applicable to decentralization of Detroit city government.

### **Detroit School Decentralization**

Decentralization was implemented in the Detroit Public Schools by state law, without local voter approval, in an attempt to bring greater participation into the educational process and to improve cooperation between the community and school administration. A 1970 state act created eight regional boards in Detroit with five members each, with the highest vote-getter in each region designated as the region chairman. It required a 13-member central board of education, including the eight regional chairmen and five at-large board members. Decentralization was implemented in 1973 and lasted for eight years.

A 1981 state law required the question of the elimination of the regional school boards to be submitted to the voters. Detroiters voted to eliminate decentralization by nearly a three to one vote. There appear to be a number of factors that influenced the Detroit voters' decision on whether to eliminate school decentralization. Many of these factors have been issues with decentralization in other cities as well.

**Representation** Decentralization is advocated when there are diverse groups in the city who feel that they are not represented. Other cities and school districts have had some success in using decentralization to give minorities a sense of participation in government. Detroit Public Schools decentralization was a movement toward community control, a

means of giving minority parents a say in how their children were being educated. By 1973, however, minorities had won election to a majority of the central board of education seats and, in 1975, a minority superintendent was appointed. By 1981, decentralization of the Detroit schools for the purpose of empowering minorities was no longer necessary. When city residents are fairly homogeneous, there is less need for district representation.

**Responsiveness** Responsiveness is affected by decentralization only when real changes are made in the chain of command. Decentralization involves the surrendering of authority by a central body to neighborhood bodies. This is often opposed by the power-holders in the central body asked to surrender their authority. This was certainly an issue for the Detroit Public Schools board of education where the regional boards were given only minimal powers. Change had minimal effects on responsiveness.

The regional boards had only an advisory roles, with no real hiring or spending powers. Budgetary powers remained with the central board of education. Central board approval was necessary to confirm the regional boards' selections for the regional superintendents and the school principals. Teachers maintained their tenure system and contracts were still bargained with the central board. Lack of accountability resulted from a failure to define responsibility between the central administration and the regions. Over time, citizens learned that if they wanted to accomplish anything they had to go to the board that controlled the budget, the central board.

**Democratic Process** Decentralization implementation does not necessarily strengthen the democratic process. It is vital to the success of decentralization to have the support of city leaders and to have wide public support and interest. Detroit Public School decentralization never had a great deal of support from educational leaders, the school administration, or the public. Voter turnout has historically been low in urban areas, especially among minorities and the poor. Decentralization did nothing to change this in Detroit.

While decentralization initially increased citizen participation and educated citizens on the workings of the Detroit Public School's board of education, this interest faded over time. Citizen participation in the

regional boards declined when participants realized that the regional boards had no real power; they had neither control over teachers nor any real input into the budget. Some regional board members were elected in uncontested races and at least one region could not create enough interest to muster a full slate of candidates. Even when decentralization attracts new participants and limited powers are shared with the community councils, these bodies tend to be reactive, doing more to block change than to introduce new initiatives.

**Costs** Concerns with costs and with representation and responsiveness are not necessarily compatible. Costs increased in the Detroit Public School system, as it does in most cities that implement decentralization. Decentralization created additional layers of bureaucracy, caused red tape and duplication of effort between the central administration and the regions. The magnitude of the additional costs were not clear and some argue that the goals achieved through decentralization were worth the additional costs. Many cities that decentralized in the 1970s have had to re-centralize in the 1980s and 1990s to save money.

**Attention to Neighborhoods** Decentralization can place more attention at the neighborhood level, but this is not necessarily an advantage. Decentralization of the Detroit Public Schools created balkanization between regions: conflicts; competition for resources and special programs; and disparities in service delivery.

**Service Delivery** The ultimate test of decentralization is whether it changed the end product in a positive way. Service delivery is often perceived to improve during the implementation of decentralization, as the public gets closer to the actual operations of the governmental unit. Decentralization did little to improve the education of the students or to bring about any real change to the large school system. Whether because decentralization was not implemented in a fashion that could bring about meaningful change or due to external circumstances of the period, decentralization did not bring about the improvements that were hoped for when it was implemented. This has been the experience of other cities as well.

There is little evidence from the Detroit school experience or elsewhere that the services provided

through decentralized programs differ dramatically from those produced under centralized programs.

### **Conclusion**

Experience with decentralization has shown that it is vital to have the support of the city's leaders, wide public support and interest, and the coordination of service delivery with neighborhood centers. Decentralization is meant to increase community control and strengthen the democratic process. Without public support and participation this is impossible.

When responsiveness is improved it often increases costs. Improvements in information flow and responsiveness tend to increase departmental workloads as more people bring their problems to the government to be solved. More cost effective alternatives may be found to increase responsiveness.

It is also important to stress the decentralization of things that are local in nature. While community control is clearly desirable to an extent, there are also economies-of-scale and the well-being of the community as a whole that should be considered in allocating decision-making responsibilities. Decentralization emphasizes potential disparities between the concerns of the neighborhoods and the needs of the entire city.

The most important issue in decentralization is the distribution of authority, especially the authority to allocate resources. Experience shows that decentralization with only limited authority given to the community councils stands little chance of success. George Washnis, in a 1972 study done for the Center for Governmental Studies, concluded that there is little point in decentralizing unless it is done with specific goals in mind and the means to reach those goals to the point of creating additional cities with substantive powers "... anything less would merely be an administrative mechanism for carrying out centrally devised programs."

Effective decentralization does not diffuse authority; it takes power that is diffused throughout a larger bureaucracy and concentrates it into new nuclei of authority. This has proven to be very difficult, if not impossible. Power-holders usually resist surrendering power. Superimposing a decentralization system on top of the existing system simply adds another layer of government, without necessarily addressing any of the problems. For this reason, decentralization is most likely to be successful when it is an integral part of the form and structure of city government.