



Viewpoint

Why the Flint, Michigan, USA water crisis is an urban planning failure



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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Flint water crisis stems from the city's inability to address the consequences of large-scale population loss, the Flint region's unwillingness to engage in regional planning, and a societal lack of care for infrastructure and shrinking cities.

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1. Introduction

In April 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, USA switched its water source from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (which gets its water from Lake Huron) to the Flint River, while it awaited the completion of a new pipeline to Lake Huron that would allow the city to join the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) (Kennedy, 2016; Lin et al., 2016). Supposedly, making the change to the KWA would save the Flint region \$200 million over 25 years (Kennedy, 2016). However, when the switch was made to the Flint River, corrosion control chemicals were not added to the water, even though the river is more acidic (has a lower pH) than Lake Huron (Torrice, 2016). As a result, lead and other metals seeped from the city's aging pipes into the water and into homes and businesses. But despite resident complaints of murky, foul-tasting water soon after the switch was made (Bosman et al., 2016), water tests conducted by an outside expert indicating a high presence of lead in homes (Delaney & Lewis, 2016), and a pediatrician's report of increased blood lead levels amongst children living in the city (Gupta et al., 2016; Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016), the local government did not acknowledge that a problem existed until October 2015, and the state government did not declare a state of emergency in Genesee County (where Flint is centrally located) until January 2016 (Lin et al., 2016). Since the fall of 2015, the issues with the city's water, particularly the presence of lead, have been known as "the Flint water crisis," which has attracted national and international attention

(LaFrance, 2016). As of this writing, the crisis has yet to be resolved; residents remain fearful of the water, some households still have high levels of lead in their water, and very few pipes have been replaced (Dolan, 2016; Mahoney, 2016).

When the switch was made, Flint was under the control of a state-appointed emergency manager due to the city's inability to remain fiscally solvent (Bosman & Davey, 2016). Some have speculated that if the city had been under local rather than state control, decisions would have been made with public health, rather than budgets, at the forefront (Egan & Dolan, 2016). While this may be true, there has been much finger-pointing beyond the emergency manager, with individuals and organizations at all levels of government (and beyond) receiving some blame [i.e. city personnel (Karimi, 2016; Bridge Magazine, 2016), the county health department (Egan & Dolan, 2016), the Michigan governor (Graham, 2016), the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (Graham, 2016), the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (Bridge Magazine, 2016), the United States Environmental Protection Agency (Delaney & Lewis, 2016), and even the Koch Brothers and DeVos family (Sharp, 2016)]. But despite the efforts of residents and the media to find answers and assign blame, there seems to be a lack of understanding that the Flint water crisis was decades in the making, stemming from structural problems that depopulating American cities face, as well as some cities in Europe. Thus, the true origins of the Flint water crisis can be found in U.S. failures to address the consequences of large-scale population loss, a general lack of regional planning, and a lack of care for infrastructure and shrinking cities—particularly in those older, industrial cities that have experienced sustained job and population losses over decades

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(Mallach & Brachman, 2013). The remainder of this paper will discuss how these three, core issues manifested in Flint.

2. Population loss

Flint has experienced extreme population loss due to factors like the closure of automobile production facilities and the movement of residents, particularly white, middle-class residents, to the surrounding suburbs (Highsmith, 2015). At Flint's peak in the 1960s, the city was home to nearly 200,000 people; it is now home to 98,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2015a; Gillotti & Kildee, 2009). As a result, there are fewer residents to pay property and income taxes, fewer people available to frequent—and thus keep in business—revenue-generating businesses that pay taxes, and more vacant structures that are blighted and reduce property values, which further reduce tax revenues. This decrease in revenue has been coupled with an increased demand for services, especially as the remaining Flint population becomes more impoverished as those with means continue to leave (Dickson, 2016; Mallach & Brachman, 2013). Consequently, rather than presume that Flint's financial troubles are due to the gross incompetence of the city's leaders—which tends to be the narrative locally, especially when race is brought into the equation—there needs to be a greater understanding, both locally and beyond, that Flint's budgetary issues have more to do with outside forces (like globalization and suburban sprawl) and the aforementioned structural issues than they do with the actions of any one individual or administration.

Even though Flint's population has dropped by half, the city continues to (or more accurately, attempts to) maintain infrastructure and services built for 200,000. It is not reasonable to believe that the same level or quality of services can be provided when there are far fewer people to pay for, and utilize, them. Further, as residents become more geographically dispersed—as neighborhoods become less dense, in Flint's case—services become less efficient and cost-effective. If Flint had somehow managed to prevent population loss, the city's budgetary situation would have been more stable, and the water crisis might not have occurred. That said, it is not reasonable to believe that all cities can or should be able to maintain stable population levels, let alone grow. In the 1980s and 1990s, Flint and its benefactors spent millions of dollars chasing silver-bullet redevelopment projects [e.g. an amusement park called "Auto World," a Hyatt Regency hotel, Water Street Pavilion (a public marketplace)] that ultimately failed (Highsmith, 2015). Perhaps city leaders wanted to look like they were "doing something big" about the city's problems, but again, these growth-oriented approaches did not work. After decades of decline, Flint should have pursued ways to better manage and address the consequences of population loss (e.g. vacant land, concentrated poverty), rather than pursue planning and policy strategies intended to attract newcomers. Thankfully, in the 2000s, Flint moved to a more grass-roots, neighborhood-based approach to community and economic development largely spearheaded by the Genesee County Land Bank (Griswold & Norris, 2007). But it is nonetheless staggering to think about all of the ways in which the resources from the failed efforts of the past might have been used to update city services and meet human needs.

When growth-based approaches fail, we (planners, researchers, and policy makers) need to think more critically about right-sizing strategies that address the consequences of population loss and help balance municipal budgets. Schilling and Logan (2008) refer to right-sizing as "...stabilizing dysfunctional markets and distressed neighborhoods by more closely aligning a city's built environment with the needs of existing and foreseeable future populations by adjusting the amount of land available for development" (p. 453). Very little is known about how to right-size a city, especially how to do so equitably without evoking fears of urban renewal (in a U.S. context). Nor do we know what kinds of services can be effectively right-sized, on what time-frame, and how much money is saved by doing so. The lack of knowledge on right-sizing likely stems from the lack of right-sizing in practice.

Politicians and city-officials in the U.S. tend not to embrace the concept, given that residents do not want to hear that services will be reduced and people potentially relocated. For example, Dave Bing, the former mayor of Detroit, Michigan, USA tried to sell right-sizing concepts to Detroiters back in 2010 and 2011, but the ideas were not well-received (Connolly, 2010). Bing chose not to run for reelection in 2013 for this, and other, reasons (Helms, 2013). But despite the unpopularity of right-sizing, it may well be time for planners and community leaders to have serious conversations about right-sizing and put politics aside. Otherwise, more cities may have crises attributable to a mismatch in size of services and size of population. If the city of Flint had right-sized, perhaps the cost of services would have been less, budgets would have been more stable, and there would not have been a need for an emergency manager or a change in water service provider.

3. Regional planning

If the notion of making the city smaller to fit its services (or vice versa) is not palatable, another option is to make the city's budget large enough to continue to maintain the existing level and quality of services, despite population loss. But trying to do so by raising taxes within the city limits will at some point become a futile effort. Taxes cannot be continuously raised without driving out remaining businesses, nor can they be endlessly raised on a population, especially one that is poor. Instead, a city must be able to tap the resources and wealth of its surrounding communities if it is unable or unwilling to right-size. If the city of Flint had been able to annex growing, adjacent communities over time for example, it would have been able to capture that tax-revenue, making its financial situation more stable. Alternatively, if the city and its environs had a regional tax-sharing system (like the one in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, USA), Flint once again would have more resources at its disposal, due to its ability to capture a portion of the tax revenues from businesses that located or relocated in the surrounding suburbs and exurbs. In reference to the Minneapolis-St. Paul system, a writer for *The Atlantic*, Derek Thompson (2015), notes that "By spreading the wealth to its poorest neighborhoods, the metro area provides more-equal services in low-income places, and keeps quality of life high just about everywhere."

Another (perhaps more fanciful) regional approach would have been for the City of Flint or Genesee County to have enacted an urban growth boundary decades ago to prevent, or at least discourage, residents from moving outward. A growth boundary would have likely resulted in more renovations to existing homes in Flint, and more demolitions of smaller or older homes with new ones built on the same sites (Gennaio et al., 2009). Other policies and incentives designed to encourage infill development may have also helped. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (2015) has outlined 30 strategies for attracting infill development in distressed communities in particular that the reader could refer to. The need to have reduced sprawl in order to stabilize Flint is most evident when one examines its county's demographic trends. While it is perhaps surprising that Flint's population has declined so dramatically over the past fifty years, what is more striking is how the county's population slightly increased over the same period. In 1960, Genesee County was home to 374,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 1995); in 2015, it was home to an estimated 411,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2015b). In other words, the overall, metropolitan population is not much larger than it was fifty-five years ago, but miles of farmland and forests have been developed anyway, at the expense of the city of Flint and the natural environment—in a process well-known American urbanist, George Galster (2012), calls "the housing disassembly line." Additionally, the fact that the county's population has not significantly changed helps to debunk the myth that Flint's troubles were "inevitable" with deindustrialization. If more people had remained within the city's limits, the city's decline would not have been so pronounced—not just in terms of population, but also in terms of social and economic conditions.

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