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Detroit's experience may hold lessons for Portland

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**Guest Columnist**

By

By Jonathan Fink

At first glance, no two cities in the United States have less in common than Portland and Detroit. So when a group of 50 Rose City business and civic leaders went to Michigan this fall on a fact-finding trip to the Motor City, the most frequent question we heard was, "Why are you here?"



Jonathan Fink

A simple answer was: "To learn how to avoid a fate like yours." But equally important was to learn whether our region is prepared to lead the nation in making transportation, particularly in cities, more sustainable.

These are the kinds of issues to be explored at a Dec. 9 public symposium at Portland State University. A panel of experts and citizens will discuss Detroit's urban problems, how the city can move forward and what lessons are relevant in planning Portland's future. On the first day of our visit, we toured some of Detroit's hardest-hit neighborhoods. We were struck by the transformation of what had been the wealthiest city in the nation after World War II. Block after block, only a handful of houses remain standing, surrounded by acres of lush vegetation. And hardly any people. Nature is reclaiming territory that commerce has abandoned.

The social conditions are even more disturbing: Population, income, education and public safety have been in decline for decades. The Detroit residents we met argue over the causes for this deterioration: a chronic racial divide, overdependence on the auto industry and too-powerful labor unions or political corruption.

But all agree that complacency was a key culprit. Warning signs were ignored over the years because life during the heyday was comfortable.

When the current recession sucker-punched an already reeling Michigan economy, the city started to get its act together, realigning behind a "New Economy Initiative" that has been endorsed by all the major constituencies.

We saw many hopeful signs of progress. Detroit's mayor, former NBA star and business leader Dave Bing, receives high praise for bringing competence and responsibility back to public service. A growing number of creative young professionals are reinvigorating a culture shaped as much by the design of the American dream as by its manufacture.

Automakers are betting heavily on the future of their birthplace. With help from the federal government, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler are using their research and development facilities to develop a green automotive sector.

There is a cautionary message for Portland. By most standards, we are light-years ahead of Detroit -- in sustainable practices, educational levels, neighborhood vitality and income. But job opportunities in Portland are limited, some companies that drive our economy are viewed with suspicion and our desire to include everyone in decision-making often thwarts decisions.

Like Detroit at its peak, we lack a strong enough sense of urgency to overcome political inertia. How bad do unemployment, educational achievement and poverty have to become for Portland to get motivated? Can we create a vision of the future that all Portlanders can rally around?

Detroit may hold some clues.

As the automakers unveil their new electric vehicles, they are rolling them out in Portland to take advantage of our green image and environmentally savvy consumers. Portland General Electric has been one of the most aggressive utilities in the country to prepare for the coming revolution, working with government and other companies to install charging stations that will establish an all-electric corridor from northern California to British Columbia.

Researchers at Portland State are studying the factors that influence the public's willingness to use electric cars and how these vehicles fit into plans for energy-efficient, low-carbon sustainable mobility. TriMet and cities in metro Portland are expanding light-rail and streetcar lines.

Reducing traffic jams, eliminating local air pollution and lowering Oregon's carbon footprint are all direct benefits of these innovations. Even more important, developing electric technology can help the Pacific Northwest become an international leader in global sustainability and livability.

Oregon has done a good job luring renewable energy firms such as SolarWorld and Vestas, growing transit manufacturers such as Oregon Iron Works and supporting companies such as Intel and Sharp, whose information products help forge a smarter economy.

As Henry Ford's assembly lines brought unmatched prosperity to Detroit in the 20th century, Portland's green technology sector combined with smart public policies and investments can secure our position as a leader in environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically competitive cities in the 21st century.

Jonathan Fink is vice president for research and strategic partnerships at Portland State University. The symposium on lessons from Detroit will be at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 9 at University Place on the Portland State campus.