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Free Press interview: Bing still aims to improve Detroit

By [Steve Neavling](#)

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Detroit Mayor, Dave Bing, talks about upcoming challenges to move the city forward in his Detroit office on Tuesday, January 24, 2012. / WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press



Detroit Mayor Dave Bing talks about upcoming challenges to move the city forward in his Detroit office on Tuesday, January 24, 2012. / WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

For much of his first term as mayor, Dave Bing challenged Detroiters to think big. Imagine safer, stronger neighborhoods, he implored.

Imagine a city where corruption and poverty are replaced with accountability and promise.

Nearly two and a half years after the basketball star-turned-entrepreneur won over voters with a pledge to run the city like a business and restore its reputation, Detroit's financial condition is dire. Without major cuts, the city is set to run out of cash for basic services by summer.

Concerned with a skyrocketing debt of \$12-billion and dwindling services, the state may soon appoint an emergency manager who would seize control of the city from Bing.

"There are a lot of things I would have liked to achieve, but we didn't for a lot of different reasons," Bing said in an interview with the Free Press. "I'm trying to utilize what I've learned and the relationships I have to help Detroit get out of this crisis."

- The city is working with Gov. Rick Snyder to forge a deal with DTE Energy to take over Detroit's beleaguered Public Lighting Department, potentially saving the city millions.
- Bing said he also is negotiating a deal to have a private company take over management of the city's Department of Transportation to improve bus service, which is critical in a city where most jobs are in the suburbs and many residents don't own cars.
- Bing acknowledges the city's finances have hampered improvements on many fronts, including the delivery of basic services. But he said he's ahead of schedule on demolishing 10,000 abandoned houses — one of his campaign promises and a key quality of life issue for many residents.
- The Detroit Works Project, a massive neighborhood revitalization effort aimed at condensing the city's neighborhoods into more densely populated areas to streamline service delivery has, at times, been unwieldy. A part of that effort — providing cheap mortgages to police in an effort to have more officers live where they work — fell far short of the 200 participants Bing had hoped for. But he said he plans to expand the program to include firefighters later this year, followed by an incentive for all city workers.

Yet, still looming over city hall is the reality of the here and now. Bing's administration has about a week to reach a landmark agreement with the city's 48 unions for deep cuts in benefits to avoid deeper state intervention.

Aiming for a better life

Bing said he gets up at 4 every morning with a single goal: creating a better life for Detroiters.

Shaking off four or five hours of sleep, the 68-year-old, who gained just 10 pounds since retiring from basketball in 1978, is obsessively punctual, energetic and exceedingly calm, arriving to work at 7 a.m. and expecting the same of his team.

The daily obstacles are steep and seemingly endless, mired in mistrust.

Bing hears the criticisms and is mindful of the urgency.

Residents tired of living in hardscrabble, fading neighborhoods are outraged with their environment. Morale among city workers has plummeted because of layoffs and deep reductions in wages and benefits. And Detroiters relying on basic services, such as street lighting, buses and police patrols, are often left frustrated.

“Nothing short of a miracle is going to keep me here,” said Rosey Cunningham, who lives near the Coleman A. Young International Airport on the city’s east side, where abandoned houses outnumber occupied ones. “It’s like a bomb went off over here.” The cornerstone of Bing’s turnaround plan was the experimental Detroit Works Project that sought to rescue people like Cunningham.

The idea was to pump life into neighborhoods with stronger housing stock, stronger schools and better services, while pruning desolate areas of the sprawling city that sap already scarce resources. The idea was to attract residents to the denser, revived neighborhoods with plenty of rehabbed houses. But that plan was derailed by politics and fear by some residents that they were being broomed out. It relied heavily on private dollars, and with those dollars came varying opinions as to how best to accomplish the goals.

“People say they want change, but as long as it doesn’t affect them. That’s the problem,” Bing said. “You are not going to satisfy everybody. But we’re at a point in the history of the city where change is absolutely necessary.”

After more than a year of public meetings and Bing’s team trumpeting the plan as a solution to many of Detroit’s ills, the mayor backed off and agreed to more immediate, modest improvements.

“When I’m out in the community, I often hear, ‘What are you going to do for my life now?’” Bing said. “I wanted to look at a more immediate impact.”

To Aaron Beal, a 24-year-old artist who moved from Royal Oak to Detroit two years ago in hopes of experiencing a renaissance, abandoning dying areas in favor of stronger neighborhoods was a no-brainer.

“I’m kind of bummed out,” Beal said of Bing’s change of plans. “You can’t save a city like Detroit until you try something unusual. Who cares what others think? Let’s try something crazy. What do we have to lose?”

Municipal experts said politicians are often uncomfortable making painful changes.

“Politicians are rarely rewarded for solving tomorrow’s problems today,” said Charles Moore, senior managing director for Conway MacKenzie, a Birmingham-based turnaround and restructuring firm that has helped reorganize municipalities and school districts. “They want to keep people optimistic.”

Whether the Detroit Works Project would have lured enough residents to better neighborhoods to justify the time and cost may never be known. Its focus has now changed to include fewer improvements for more neighborhoods, using a handful of neighborhoods for evaluation purposes.

But the mayor still wants police and firefighters to move back.

“I do feel like we will get this year between 25 and 100 officers into the city, and from my vantage point, that’s a win,” Bing said.

With more houses to offer on the cheap, Bing plans to announce relocation incentives for firefighters later this year, followed by all city workers.

Ever-changing advisers

Former mayoral appointees describe Bing as loyal and trustworthy.

“He has a very strong and almost unusual work ethic,” said former Bing spokeswoman Karen Dumas, who was forced from Bing’s administration after being hit with a whistleblower lawsuit. “He’s also a very trusting boss, which is something you don’t usually find.”

But compounding some of Bing’s struggles as mayor has been the revolving door that continues to turn at City Hall, ushering in and out more than 30 of his top advisers. Bing says the churn was necessary to ensure only the brightest minds were working on the city’s incredibly complex problems.

“If you have people here who got us into this financial situation, why the hell would you want to keep them?” Bing asked. “So when I look at my leadership team today, it’s a complete turnover, and they are all basically outside business people.”

A financial nightmare

Bing inherited a financial nightmare. For nearly a decade, past mayors spent \$100 million or more every year over what the city had in its tax base.

“For the number of years that the city was running a deficit, it was able to survive by raising the debt and shifting payments,” said Moore, the turnaround expert. “It was able to put off for another day the need to deal with the issues.”

The budget crisis finally came to a head in 2010.

In response, Bing reduced the work force from 13,400 to 9,800 and collected outstanding payments from taxpayers and Detroit Public Schools.

During a recent trip to Washington, D.C., Bing convinced federal officials to tweak a grant to keep 108 police officer from being laid off, keeping his word to spare public safety.

With the desperate need for police, firefighters and buses, Bing said budget reductions must be long-term, such as reducing the spiraling costs of pensions and health care benefits — concessions that soon could be forced on unions if the state decides to appoint an emergency manager, which could happen within weeks.

It's a situation so sensitive that even City Council members — who often clash with the mayor — didn't want to comment about Bing or his plans for fear it would appear to the state that they are at odds.

For many observers, Bing's legacy depends largely on dramatic changes, such as building stronger neighborhoods around good schools, reducing poverty and attracting new residents.

“I could care less about my legacy,” the mayor said. “It's about helping the people in the city of Detroit, helping to solve some of the problems here. If that leaves a legacy, that's fine, but that's not my goal.”

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