

Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

Russ Bellant

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

July 12, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Russ Bellant is a public water expert, advocate, and prominent activist in Detroit in the resistance against tax foreclosures, water shutoffs, and emergency management. Russ serves as the elected president of Helco Block Club, a Library Commissioner of the Detroit Public Library, and the treasurer for the 9th Police Precinct Community Relations Council. In 2017, he ran for a seat on City Council against incumbent Scott Benson as a means to improve the quality of life for the residents of District 3 by saving public spaces for public use and bringing equity to resource accessibility. As a recent retiree of the City of Detroit, he organized against the looting of retirees' pension funds during the Detroit bankruptcy period.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Abstract

Russ Bellant provides his expertise on the history of Metro Detroit's water system, the Detroit bankruptcy, and the Flint water crisis. Russ shares his experiences as a recent retiree of the City of Detroit, the real life impacts of the bankruptcy and emergency management, and the politics of gentrification. Russ examines the history of the systematic takeover of the City of Detroit, the consent agreement imposed by Rick Snyder, the privatization of public services, and the bankruptcy overseen by Judge Steven Rhodes. The Detroit bankruptcy had devastating effects, such as the looting of city workers' pension funds, the privatization of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and the Detroit Public Lighting Department, and the state takeover of the Detroit Public School system and Belle Isle. Russ discusses the reasons he chose to run for City Council District 3 in 2017 and the political environment surrounding the campaign.

Keywords

2017 Detroit City Council election; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit Land Bank; Detroit Public Lighting Department; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit Water and Sewerage Department; Education; Electoral politics; Emergency management; Flint water crisis; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Great Lakes Water Authority; Journalism; Karegnondi Water Authority; Pensions; Privatization; Water shutoffs;

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Transcript of interview conducted July 12, 2019, with:

Russ Bellant [RB]

Detroit, Michigan

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

PB: So, I guess we can dive in then.

RB: Okay.

PB: Just to resume from last time, for formality's sake, give us your name, where you live, and your organizations.

[0:00:00]

RB: Sure. My name is Russ Bellant. I live on Helen Street in Northeast Detroit [Michigan], District 3. I'm a president of my block club, Helco block club, and vice president of the We Care [About Van Dyke-Seven Mile?] neighborhood association, and vice president of our East Side AARP [American Association of Retired Persons] chapter. I serve as treasurer on the 9th Precinct Community Relations Council, and I'm commissioner of the Detroit Public Library, a Commissioner of the Detroit Public Library.

[0:00:37]

PB: Last time, we spent a lot of time talking about education and about water, and I'm hoping we can keep talking about water today. But, I also wanted to ask about housing and land use in your neighborhood. Could you talk a little bit about how your neighborhood was impacted in the late 2000s with the Great Recession and the mortgage crisis?

RB: Sure. Our neighborhood--and here I'm talking between 6 and 8 Mile, between Dequindre and Gratiot Avenue primarily. Our neighborhood was most dramatically affected--along with some areas in Northwest Detroit by the Brightmoor area--by the foreclosure challenges, and it will be remembered that the Wayne County Treasurer decided to put Detroit properties on the internet for sale, on the world wide web, and, you know, was putting 50,000 properties a year out of 384,000 parcels, some of which were vacant land commercial properties, industrial properties, but primarily residential properties, putting them on auction. And also, it will be remembered that the legislature had provided for additional compensation for county treasurers who sold land during the tax auction on some basis where the county treasurer could be richly rewarded in Wayne County for putting all these tens of thousands of properties.

And, I know just on my block club area alone we had dozens--at that time, my block club was two streets that were a half mile each in length, so one-mile street in essence. We just saw property after property getting picked off, and we had companies, purchasers from Malaysia, from Dubai, from California, New Jersey, you know, all over the country and all over the world, and I believe some from England. And, they were uncontactable, unreachable. I went... One property for...that we were particularly concerned about was owned by a Las Vegas [Nevada] investor who lived in California but used a Nevada corporation address, and I did everything. I went through online property records to try to find this person. I went through, you know, every resource you could imagine on the internet, and the person was unlocatable. That was the pattern time and time again. And, I remember a friend of mine who was an attorney was on vacation up in northern Michigan, and there were some attorneys also at the table, and these attorneys actually told them their job was to create hidden shell corporations to protect the identity of the investors while they were buying land on these foreclosure processes. So, it really... They became a racket in our view.

Now, it isn't just the identity of the owners that was a challenge. It was the fact that when they got it they had absolutely no intention of doing any investment on the property, no maintenance, whether it was mowing grass, shoveling snow, boarding the house. And, you know, I'll never know what was in their minds when they bought that, but it appeared that some element in Detroit was telling them that they should buy these as a great investment because they were going to grow in value, and they could flip these houses and buy it for 500 dollars and flip them and maybe make 5,000 dollars off it or something. And so, these folks of course wouldn't pay the property taxes. In three, it would go--four years, it would go back up on the tax auction, and they could either buy it again or realize that it was a stupid venture and not bother again. But, there were always people in line, and I always remind people there were two corporations created in Malaysia created strictly for the purpose of buying houses in the Detroit auction, you know, half a planet away.

And so, we saw that. We lived that. We tried to deal with it, but in the end through some collaborative activity I was engaged in, I had some sheets of plywood donated to me, three-eighths plywood, and we just did a boarding campaign and started securing these because we didn't like the drug trafficking elements that were coming into the vacant houses, and we didn't want further vandalism to deteriorate the neighborhood further because there is always the hope that somehow somebody who really cared about the property would come in and take it, you know, hopefully to live there [laughs] or develop it in some way. So, you know, we went into a property protection mode during this period of time, and we boarded up a dozen houses. Eventually, when, you know, the demolition projects that were started under Dave Bing, took acceleration under Mike Duggan, many of these houses were eventually destroyed. So that, you know, that's the brilliant outcome of the tax foreclosure process.

And, it was always our frustration that many, you know, the houses targeted were sometimes the better houses on the foreclosure list, brick, pretty sound structure, and you're right next to it, and you'd have a fire burnt-out house where the whole second story was burnt off and the walls were out like this and that would just be sitting there, and the house literally next to it, a solid brick house, would be torn down. And, you know, it was always a head scratcher for us how these things happened. But in the end, the... One out of four properties in our neighborhood,

like five years ago, was owned by the Detroit Land Bank because of the foreclosure process, and that number increased to almost one out of every three in recent years. If you add the state, which only owns three out of the 15 public owned properties, but then the Land Bank and planning development department, if you add it all together, about one-third of the properties parcels. Our residential block club is now two...two residential miles of streets. It expanded several years ago. And, you know, what can you do with that? You know, a lot--a number of those parcels would have been turned into vacant lots now, and the city half mows them.

And speaking from a city-wide perspective, the fact that they own 100,000 parcels out of 384,000 parcels means that...that they're not in the hands of owners who contribute property taxes, contribute by snow removal. And, the storm water management fees called drainage fees on our water bills don't get paid by land bank properties, and so whatever real costs are there--and I don't think...I think there are more than real costs being paid. The drainage fees are a whole other discussion. But, those don't get paid by Land Bank properties. So, you take a huge section, you take one-fourth of Detroit out of the cost of running Detroit and make the other three-fourths pay for it, you know. So, it has an ongoing liability at the neighborhood level from the individual homeowners and families, you know, up to the general population, and the foreclosure process will--has done irreparable harm as a result, I think, to everyone that lives in this city whether they realize they're paying the cost of it or not.

[0:10:42]

PB: So, all these...

RB: That's my short answer. [laughs]

PB: That was great. And so, all... Essentially, the city in this period has become like a chess board for people with money that can buy up parcels strategically, move those strategically, like we saw with the Marouns in the recent land swap. So, it's revealed for me, not having been here very long, that there's a stark contradiction

between those that have access to land and who doesn't. What was that experience like for residents in your neighborhood who might have wanted to buy side lots or who might have wanted to buy some of these properties but weren't able to because folks in Malaysia put their hands on it?

RB: Well, I'll say from personal experience it was possible for people to do that in...in the earlier years of the big mega auction because there were houses close to me that I thought should be rescued and shouldn't be demolished. But based on the trajectory of where we saw things going, they were eventually going to follow the demolitions. So, I bought them off of the tax auctions. Back then, you could register...you had had to know enough to register well in advance. You couldn't call up there a day in advance. You had to have been registered three weeks beforehand, right, and...but you had to pay \$1000 down as a deposit back then. Now, you have to pay a whole lot more to register, and it's a deterrent for the neighborhood rescuer types. You know, and I picked up various properties, yet two of them were owned--were occupied, not owned--by folks doing drug trafficking. So when I picked up those houses, those folks were out and gone and never heard of again. Some were just plain vacant and needed work.

And so for the last eight years or so, I've just been rehabbing houses...well, not just that, but I've been rehabbing houses in my neighborhood, and I used all of my own money so there are no strings attached where somebody could say you have to use this contractor, and, you know, 'cause sometimes some of the grants you get, the public grants, put so many conditions on you, and they put liens on the property [laughs], and it's not really, you know, your property except superficially. And so, I get 100% of my own financing and working at my own pace, and, you know, I got five of the houses occupied and not as a landlord. Although some people wanted to rent for a while first, but...to do purchase agreements, so I did purchase agreements where for three or four years people owned the property, you know, and then paid me back the cost of what I put into it. And then, two other people in our neighborhood did this...started doing the same thing, and one woman--I think she might be on her third house now--she does a lot of the work herself too.

And so, we've probably... Within our block club territory, we've probably rescued about fifteen houses and made them occupiable or on the road to becoming

occupiable, and the block club president in the block club next to us, just to the east of us, is doing that now with a house in his neighborhood. So, you know, it's kind of...try to be a little bit of a counterforce, you know, to where things are going with the vacating of the land and the depopulation of the people in Northeast Detroit, which was once envisioned in a document that Detroit Future City published that showed us going into green space [laughs], you know, when we were 100% solid residential and industrial and commercial. And, you know, so having seen that back years ago, that prompted a lot of people in our area to want to do more to confound that message. Detroit Future City doesn't put that out today, but that's what they did then, and it motivated some people to work in a direction to counter it and to preserve the neighborhood and preserve, keep populations. In fact, two of the houses that I sold, people came back to Detroit to live in them that had moved out. So, it was all good.

[0:15:57]

PB: So, in that period...

RB: Almost all good. [laughs]

PB: So, in that period we're talking about this devastating economic situation.

RB: Yes.

PB: It had such an impact not just on individuals but the city in general. Would that context... Would you tell us a little bit about the consent agreement and what the implications of that meant for the future of this city and tell us about some of the organizing work that went on against that?

RB: Yes. When Dave Bing was mayor, there was a relationship that was clearly developed with then Governor Rick Snyder, who then upon taking office his fourth act as governor, enabling act signing legislation to create a law, was to create a

more aggressive, a more dictatorial emergency manager law that was an emergency manager law, Public Act 72, that went back to the late 1980s. But, that didn't . . . that gave . . . you could have different interpretations to where some lines of authority conflicted with elected officials like in the school districts and so forth, and it was actually litigated when Jennifer Granholm was still governor, and the judge, Wendy Baxter, ruled that there were limitations in the law and those had to be honored by the emergency financial manager. So, the first thing Rick Snyder did when he took office was to bring a draft that had been developed of the law through the legislative process, get it signed, and that had two...it had two elements to it, and it had said that basically that the city...that the state Department of Treasury could negotiate consent agreements if they found through valuation that there was an emergency crisis in a school district or a city or a municipality or county government, and they could either do a consent agreement where they worked with the elected officials or just do outright emergency management in which elected officials are kicked to the side, have no power. In fact, there is actually legal sanctions against them doing certain things, the elected officials, that is.

You know, Rick Snyder started with the City of Detroit on a consent agreement. Of course, he immediately came in and took over...made sure the Detroit Public Schools were taken over under the new law because that was the looting process of the day. But the...with the city, they said that they wanted to cooperate with the city government, and Rick Snyder was working with Dave Bing. Dave Bing was collaborating with him, and they came up with a whole list of objectives they wanted under the consent agreement. It was like privatizing the Department of Transportation functions. It was taking Belle Isle and giving it to the state. It was... I'm surprised I'm not remembering more of them off the top of my head. It was taking apart the Detroit lighting system which Dave Bing was doing anyways. They also came in during this period and said that they'd been doing an investigation of the Department of [Health and] Human Services which aided...primarily aided senior citizens and gave grants for low income families to do certain things: preserve their home, like put a roof on their home where the roof was clearly damaging the house, the bad condition of the roof was. And, they claimed that they were doing this investigation they found that this, this and that. All of these things were routine business that they were supposed to be doing, but it made it sound to the public that there was a problem.

And, Laura Corrigan, who was heading the Department of [Health and] Human Services for Rick Snyder in his first term, came to City Council and said, “We’re gonna, you know, take this department from the city,” and they... She had just announced that they’re doing a city investigation, but, you know, they decided they weren’t going to go through the pretense of investigation. They were just going to outright take the department, and one of the council members said, “Well, for how long?” She said, “Forever.” And then, they financed the function of that department to a non-profit in Wyandotte [Michigan] that had no connection to the city [laughs] and probably had some kind of connection to a politician downriver and was a bone being thrown to somebody.

But, this is...that...this is the kind of way that the city was being treated immediately by Snyder administration. So, they took the money, anything that had a lot of federal dollars going through it, you know, that were predictable dollars, like the Human Services Department was basically administering federal dollars for federal programs, and there really was no...nothing ever proven that they did something wrong. [laughs] And then, they--the Department of Public Transportation has a lot federal dollars. Employment training has a lot of federal dollars. And so, all this led towards a process of privatization of those dollars so that money could go to contractors and benefactors of the governor or mayor or whomever, and all of this was going on in 2011, 2012, primarily 2012, and it was, I think, on April 4, 2012 the City Council was asked to--was told they had to do a vote on this to decide whether or not to do a consent agreement, and Snyder said, “If you don’t do a consent agreement, I’m going to put an emergency manager over the city. “ Now, the preface of all of this was, you know, was the claim that the city was financially out of control, it needed emergency measures.

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How stealing Belle Isle helped with the emergency management was a mystery. I mean, there was a cost for Belle Isle, but those costs were paid for in the city budget. What Dave Bing did is--and Council Member JoAnn Watson emphasized this time and again in the Bing years--he wouldn’t spend the money to maintain Belle Isle. So, Belle Isle started looking dirtier and unkept and people said, “The city can’t manage it. “ Well, it’s a political decision. You... The money was in the budget, and JoAnn Watson would say, “Why aren’t you spending the money?” She

would say this through the city council liaison, who was Adam Hollier who was representing the mayor. He was the liaison to City Council. And she'd say, "I want answers. Why is the money that's in the budget not being spent to keep Belle Isle in its more attractive condition?" Did the same thing with street lighting. Dave Bing came in, and he immediately got rid of the people that maintained the streetlights, and I know that because I created the apprenticeship program for that because that was my job in the city, you know, it was running the city apprenticeship programs.

When Dennis Archer was mayor, the street lighting system had been completely renovated in 1997, and part of that renovation, they put in photocell-operated lights that had basically electrical power going directly to the lighting unit. So, we felt there needed to be a training program for people doing that because, you know, you can get jolted, and that was some serious voltage up there 40 feet in the air, and you could be dead. So, we put in an apprenticeship program, and that could be entry level for someone to become a lineman or a more advanced technician at a later date. But, it improved the safety and the quality of the maintenance of the street lighting system. So, all those people were gotten rid of, reassigned. I don't mean that they were gotten rid of and thrown to the street. They were given other duties, and they quit maintaining the streetlights, and then the newspapers joined in the preplanned message the city can't maintain the system. You know, it wasn't that much money to maintain...to change a light bulb. The light bulb was 12 bucks, the hourly rate at 12 dollars probably covered that, and you had a well-lit city, and Archer put in a good system when he was mayor.

So, the... It's a little less mysterious when you look at the fact that ever since Jerome Cavanagh was mayor, the city...Edison--as it was then called. Detroit Edison, now DTE--had been pressuring the mayor to get rid of the public lighting department because they saw it as competition. They don't want any independent utility operating within their territory, and Dave Bing was a Director of DTE. So when he comes in, what does he do? He starts shutting down the lighting system, and he shuts down the power plant that the city had. The city's power plant in 2003 came online and started providing power before DTE could start power when the whole blackout happened in the whole Midwest region. DTE was tied into there, and they benefitted from the fact that we got our power up faster than they did 'cause it takes electricity to start a plant [laughs], you know. You can't start from nothing. It's not like a lawn mower where you can pull a cord

and start... [laughs] start producing. So, Dave Bing gives DTE a 150 million dollar four-year contract after buying electricity for a year without a contract, and that contract does not even have a rate cable or a cost in it.

So, DTE can bill at whatever rate they choose to bill at within the parameters of the Public Service Commission, and, you know, the city had no role in it. He also hired a--this is all during the consent agreement period--he hired a former vice president, a vice president of DTE, to be on his staff and to develop a system of getting rid of part of the public lighting system. And, what they were gonna do--and they put this in writing, and I have a copy of it. They were gonna shut down all the street lights in what they considered the least desirable neighborhoods. And in the somewhat better neighborhoods, they were gonna keep a percentage. And the next level of preferred neighborhood, they were gonna keep maybe 60-80%. And in the best neighborhoods, they were gonna keep 100% of their street lighting.

So, this was all... You know, you felt like you were in the old Middle Ages aristocratic privilege system, you know, where the poor get stomped, and the rich get recogni--full recognition and rights. And so, this is what his plan was, and, obviously, it offended a lot of people. But, they put it on their website, and it was on their website until after Mike Duggan became mayor. And so, the shutdown was to take half the street lighting system out of Detroit, and that's what they were putting in place, and, you know, whether how much of that was for DTE's benefit, how much was done in concert with Rick Snyder, or whether...or both, they all came together, and they were doing this. So, you know, whether it was deliberately undermining Belle Isle, the lighting system, the power system, the Human Services Department, they began trying to dismantle the city services and make it a less desirable place for people to live and raise a family, and that's the...that's the period leading up to the consent agreement.

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Now, the consent agreement is, of course, again based on the claim that the city is in financial duress. Dave Bing's General Counsel Krystal Crittendon told the mayor--and shared this eventually with City Council too--told the mayor Mike

Ilitch owed the city 280 million dollars. Now, that's the number that sticks in my mind. Other people have said it's higher than that, but let's say it's 280 million dollars because every Detroit Tigers ticket that was sold when the Tigers were at Tiger Stadium had a surcharge on it, I think about a dollar per ticket, for maintenance of the park, which was a city property. When the Red Wings played hockey at Joe Louis Arena, there was a surcharge on it to maintain Joe Louis Arena, which was a city property which Mike Ilitch was benefitting from. Mike Ilitch was collecting all the money and never forwarded it to the city. And obviously, Dave Bing and his predecessors weren't forcing him to do it either from the Ilitch ownership period...just from the period Ilitch owned the teams. And so, she said, "Since we're being pressed by the state, we should try to collect that money that's ours." And Dave Bing came back and said, "Ah, they don't want to pay it." She said, "That's not...you know...that's not... [laughs] What's that got to do with it? [laughs] Of course, they don't want to, [laughs] but it's our money. We should get it." My understanding is Dave Bing signed some agreement where they gave the city literally a few million dollars and waved the rest of it.

Another element that happens at this time, the coalition of City of Detroit unions came up with a plan that would be basically revisions of the collective bargaining agreements. It would have saved the city 160 million dollars, and I never looked at the plan, but I believe some of it was around health care costs and that sort of thing, and Rick Snyder told Dave Bing, "Do not sign that," and he never gave a reason. He said not to sign it, and 'cause Dave Bing had negotiated it and had took it to city council, and then he withdrew it, because Rick Snyder said, "Don't do it," and he took his orders from Rick Snyder. And, one can only...the only reason to do that 'cause it--from Rick Snyder's standpoint--is to prevent workable solutions being worked out by Detroiters and stakeholders in Detroit so that he doesn't have an excuse to take over the city. So, he wants to the city to--additionally, in addition to Ilitch's 280 million dollars, there's another 160 million, and then there's about 500 million dollars owed. According to the Michigan Municipal League study, there was half a billion dollars the state of Michigan owed the city of Detroit in revenue sharing. So, you add this up, you're almost at a billion dollars. And so, if that money had been, you know, and those savings had been made available to the city, there would have been absolutely no pretext whatsoever of doing a bankruptcy.

Now, the consent agreement... All this is happening during the period of the consent agreement. And then, the city council is being pressed. There is a hundred people coming to meetings for city council to say do not sign, do not sign, putting arguments together, putting the information together. And, the city council on a split vote--I don't remember the numbers, but I think it was probably a 6-3 split vote to implement Rick Snyder's consent agreement. And...but when it came to actually pulling the trigger on certain things, a vote to sign off...a vote to give away Belle Isle, a vote to do some of these other things, the city council wouldn't do it. So, Rick Snyder said, "Hi, you're violating the consent agreement," because the consent agreement was a cheap version of the bankruptcy, right? When the city council would balk on certain things, they were gonna have to say, "We're now gonna have to bring in an emergency manager." And then, of course, Kevyn Orr is his name, and he comes in and uses the bankruptcy law to override the Michigan Constitution and start taking assets like our water department from the City of Detroit and the pensions and gutting all that.

So, the emergency...the consent agreement in retrospective looks like...makes it look like the governor was trying to work with the city, but the city wouldn't cooperate, and so he had no choice but to override the Michigan Constitution, you know, and the bankruptcy law because the bankruptcy law says local officials have to file that, not the state of Michigan and not any viceroy stand-in for the governor, but local officials are supposed to be the ones that file for municipal bankruptcy. Everybody pretended that law didn't exist, [laughs] you know. I mean, our side didn't pretend that, [laughs] you know, that was that was already the beginning of saying, "We're gonna ride roughshod over everything, and we're gonna do what we want. We're gonna fully implement our agenda, and you're gonna live with it and die with it." And that's how the consent agreement played out as a transition measure towards emergency management.

And after Kevyn Orr gets named, then Dave Bing, who felt he had been faithful to Rick Snyder, started attacking Rick Snyder for appointing him, for appointing Kevyn Orr, saying, "I was ready to be emergency manager. I knew more, etc. etc." And, he had done everything he had been told to do, and then Rick Snyder kicked him aside as well. So, you know, no sympathy for Dave Bing, but, you know, it just shows the lack of integrity on all sides from the Mayor's office to the Governor's office in all these proceedings in the willful neglect of the law.

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PB: So, you were talking about a consent agreement or during emergency management where there's a lot of outcry against and organizing around these issues. And yet, as you've described, Kevyn Orr and Rick Snyder run roughshod on the city of Detroit. What lessons can you draw or do you draw from that period of organizing against the consent agreement, against emergency management? Like, was there anything that could have been done differently to stop these forces from taking over Detroit or looting the city once they were there? I guess, just in general, what do you take away from this?

RB: Well, I think back then, as I recall activity, a lot people were engaged, were trying to make sure that there...that the world they could influence knew what was going on and tried to engage more people to come down. You know, really, to get a hundred people at a city council meeting when you had to pay for the downtown parking and deal with the hassle of that agenda, you know, was not outstanding, but it was...it was a symbol of a wider discontent, but not wide enough. And, I think every...when they got ready to do the emergency management, the State of Michigan tried to prepare for an uprising with the belief that the people were going to rebel, and I think when they saw that relative passivity and acceptance of this, they felt that, hey, nobody can really check us here. We got these troublemakers, several hundred people who don't like what we're doing, but to hell with them.

And, I think...I think what worked against us was the reports of the news media were consistently against us because they presented the governor's side for the most part or tried to make cases. This was a problem, that was a problem, you know. A school board member who wrote memos with typographical errors was a story for days and days and, you know, just kept getting played. But when emergency managers would take over and loot the schools and do completely indefensible 40 million dollar contract, there was not a peep from the media, and the media told reporters working on stories critical against the emergency managers to get off the stories. So, we had overcome not just the usual lack of attention that people paid that government. You know, how many citizens anywhere in the United States can tell you anything about what the Defense

Authorization bill is? Supposedly, we all know what that is, you know, but there's just so much to know, and most people can't take the time in their lives to follow it. So, they rely on the media to get their information, and the media kept saying this is failing, that's failing, this is failing, that's failing, the city's in this kind of trouble and that kind of trouble and so forth. And, it created a general impression that the city needed to be...the city needed to be... [sigh] How would you say... Not restructured, but there had to be some kind of outside corrective force that needed correction. It needed correction, and Rick Snyder wasn't unpopular at that time. People didn't... They saw him the way they saw Bill Milliken, you know. People okayed the guy, you know, and stuff like that, said he seemed honest and so on and so forth.

And so, I think looking back on it, I don't know how much more people could have done because not that many people saw that train because it was out there on a mountain curve [laughs], and as it was...until the headlights came around that curve, not everybody saw where this was going. Now, there was always a core group that did, you know, many handfuls, dozens of people, but in a city of our size, it needs a lot more than that. And, those folks didn't have money, you know. They had passion. They had knowledge. They had commitment, and that isn't enough.

And, you know, I think we had an impact because the consent agreement, I think, was a concession to the resistance, some kind of concession. And the bankruptcy, I think most people thought the city was bankrupt because of the media reports. The [Mike] Ilitch money never got reported in the media. There was a little reporting and a little challenge about--to the state--how can you be the person challenging the financial conditions of Detroit and other cities when you owe billions of dollars in revenue sharing to cities across the state of Michigan, including the city of Detroit? Now, nobody challenged them in the media about that, or maybe it was a passing sentence. But, by and large, if you take the media package, there isn't critical coverage of any of the claims of the bankruptcy process.

And at that point, you know, all the activists can do is continue to do deep into education and outreach and a discussion with people young and old about what has happened and what can happen if we don't engage and assert our own power

and authority. We sued against the emergency manager law, and a federal judge said, "We're not going to listen to the suit until after the bankruptcy's over. So, yeah, suppose it is unconstitutional, but I'm going to allow the unconstitutional process take hold and have its power and have its day in court, and then we'll decide later whether it's constitutional or not, you know."

And that... So, the federal judiciary was part of that failure of the system. They had time to make a decision about constitutional issues before the bankruptcy, and they completely failed. And so, what we had is a media system, what we call the fourth estate, and we had the judiciary, the third estate, all saying that one man in Lansing [Michigan] can dictate the terms of existence of a city or a school district and wipe away the role of the election or the electoral board. And, you know, Michigan was historically known as a local control state, the constitution of 1909, and a lot of that is reflected in the 1963 constitution that we live under today. We're about local control and authority, and you can see those provisions in the Michigan Constitution being systematically sidelined, and they are to this day.

It's not just through the bankruptcy and the federal court process, but, you know, Article 7 on Education is completely...is completely like it didn't exist in the constitution. It gives all the power over public education to the State Board of Education. The Governor has usurped that, starting with John Engler and all his successors, and said that they're going to dictate the terms of Detroit Public Schools to the point the legislature is passing laws about third grade reading [laughs] and so forth. None of that is in the province of the Michigan Constitution. They're not not allowed to do any of that, but nobody is paying enough attention and cares because there's a new regime in power, and there's a new mentality that doesn't believe in constitutional conditions and don't believe that voters should be the ultimate authority, and so...and that's what the emergency manager law tested. Again, going back, what's disturbing to see, the third estate and the fourth estate, the judiciary and the media, be partners with this post-democracy mentality.

[0:47:38]

PB: So, as a city employee at this time, can you talk about the ways that you were personally impacted by the attack on pensioners during the bankruptcy?

RB: Yeah, I was a recent retiree. I had retired in 2009. Yeah, I did speak to the court. In the bankruptcy court, citizens were allowed to address the court directly, not through an attorney. And so, I did speak on two matters, and one was the pension system and about the provisions in the bankruptcy process to privatize and dismantle parts of the city workforce, and I said, "All that's going to do is have less people supporting the pension system and creating a pension crisis down the road for current retirees." You know, nothing profound in that, but I'm not sure it was being said at the time, so I wanted to make sure it was said on the record. Judge [Steven] Rhodes just did one of these 'yeah, yeah, yeah' kind of nods. The first part he listened to when I talked about the public authority and--not the public lighting authority, but about the authority in the Michigan Constitution regarding the public lighting systems--and that the Constitution prohibits the state from having any role in the control or disposition of public utilities. The... Again, the local control was paramount in the constitution, and only the citizens on a referendum could dispose of the public lighting department. And, he seemed to be attentive to that and listening to that and that, you know. I joined the rallies and encouraged people to come to the rallies that others were organizing to oppose the transferring of pensioner's wealth to the Wall Street investors.

And in the end, you know, the summation... We didn't have dollar figures at the time for all of this, but, you know, the post-bankruptcy estimate is that the pensioners had, you know, out of the 7 billion dollars of solutions that Kevyn Orr came up with, he took 5 billion from the retirees by eliminating their health care, cutting back their pension payments, and doing that so-called claw back where anybody who retired 2003 or after, they could go into their annuity savings funds--and I always try to remind people annuity savings funds were not...was not money the city put in. Employees themselves put the money in the annuity fund. It was managed by the pension system to maximize the value of it, but it was not city money or public money. It was out of our paychecks, and Kevyn Orr used a superficial pretext that the judge accepted because the judge wanted to loot the pension system. So, we had a bankruptcy judge who was already pre-disposed to gutting the pensioners before we started. And so, what they did to the pensioners after 2003 was go into their annuity funds. It was like taking their bank. From me, they took 25,000, but I know one person who they took, you know, they took

150,000 dollars out of his annuity savings. So, you add all this up together, and they came up with 5 billion dollars. And everyone had said, "Oh, Kevyn Orr was brilliant." No, he's a goddam thief. Excuse my language. He was a thief and a looter, and he put people's, retirees' lives at risk.

I remember a gentleman who I had and have great respect for who was the senior administrator in my department, and we were on the phone. He says, "I have eight prescriptions that my doctor says I have to take," and he says, "with this I cannot afford it." He says, "I actually have to choose which ones I'm going to take, and I don't know what that means for me, for my life and my health." And, he was just dumbfounded that this betrayal could happen to people who, you know, in his case, I think he put about 40 years of service in to the city. And, he was a good man, and there were many, many, many good people working for the city. They'd give a good day's work and provided essential services, whether it's public health in terms of doing the garbage pickup--and, we had everything, and I don't say this in a Pollyanna-ish way, sort of like out of naïvete, but I really look critically at the city functions. On my street at 8 AM, this trash pickup started. Every week, that truck was there. And, it's 7:55. He'd start at eight AM as he was instructed, and our trash got hit every time, bulk pick up and everything. We weren't told we had to make, put all the twigs in little bundles and wrap them in string, you know. You had your bulk pick up out there, they grabbed it, and it was gone. We had--that was another thing Dave Bing did. He cut the bulk pick up way back so people would say, "Give us a solution, any solution." But, that's a side thing.

The city had a lot of good workers, and they had people really dedicated to public service. I saw it in the water systems. I saw it in the public service systems across the city, the lighting systems. People went out and fixed that stuff every day. In some cases, you're working with 22,000 volt systems. It's not just a casual thing to do. You got a lot of safety and a lot of attentives and other people's safety that you have to be attentive to, and they did a great job with what they had. And, you know, I think the idea that people who stand at the pinnacles of privilege can just dispose of people's lives, well-being, health, and the promise, the guaranteed constitutional promises because the Michigan Constitution guaranteed pensions could not be compromised. That's not the word they used. I'm sorry. I'm blanking on the exact. But, they were supposed to be impregnable. Once the contract is made, you know, pensions and contracts, they're supposed to be inviolable, and, of course, that is what the bankruptcy was designed to bypass. And, it speaks to

the larger mentality of people as--not as citizens with the sovereign right of power, but as disposable people who can be swept away after they've used them for their...used their lives, and that parallels that attitude towards the residents as well as to the workers.

[0:56:06]

PB: That kinda preempts the question I was gonna ask. Like, what's the message that comes down when you look at the Great Recession? People don't get bailed out, the banks get bailed out. Look at Detroit's financial crisis. Banking institutions get bailed out, paid out for predatory loans and shady deals that they made in the city all out of the pockets of the residents. So, what's... Like, what's the message that that sends to the people of Detroit who have been here so long, for city employees that had invested their lives into maintaining and sustaining the city?

RB: Well, I think... [sigh] I think we can see that there's clearly a power structure in the city, but there's a power structure in the country and in the world, and the people who are at the center of finance are part of that--an essential part of that power structure. And, not every person there is considered, you know, immune from certain obligations, but by and large, they can dictate the terms of existence, politicians.

I mean, in Detroit, many elected officials are beholden to a couple of financiers in Detroit, and they set the...they set a lot of broad parameters around direction of policy. And then, there are other actors who come in to influence elections and outcomes and messages that citizens have to be well organized to overcome. Right now, the citizens are not well enough organized to overcome that because most people have some kind of intuition that there was some injustice about it, but a lot of people can't articulate what that was.

And, there's also a belief in, you know--and that's part of the reason I hate to... I don't hate, but I'm...I have a little reservation about talking about the power structures, but that is the reality. It's because it promotes people thinking they're powerless, and they don't have an ability to do anything, so why bother. I try to

emphasize what the rights of the charter and the Constitution of Michigan and the federal Constitution and the rights and the powers and where citizens stand in historically in this. But, you know, we know that the Constitution for centuries really wasn't...wasn't a protection for rights of millions of people. It was a barrier in some cases. It was cited as a barrier for rights and so forth to deny people of color any recognition whatsoever in the Constitution for rights to vote and so forth. And while all that has changed in our lifetime, the mentality that undergirded it still exists today, and they're trying to reassert in some quarters a return to the pre-civil rights era of a...without calling it what it is.

And so, I think our challenge is... Our challenge is our...that, you know, people live in some fear over, you know, finances, of the economic realities of the world, the instability and the fears from a decline of neighborhoods, and a feeling that this is being done by force, that they're...they have no voice to speak against. And, of course, I don't believe that's true, but a lot of people do, and it's very disabling for them and for the city and for the community. And, Detroit's not unique in that regard. I mean, if working class people organized across this country, it would be a different country. [laughs] But, they don't see it either.

[1:01:22]

PB: So, how...when you are in conversation with people who have that kind of mentality, that feel powerless, that feel defeated by being attacked on all sides for so long, how do you encourage them to recognize the power that they do have to act? So, picture if I'm like one of your neighbors and I have that mentality, what kind of conversation are we going to have?

RB: Well, I've had a whole lot of different conversations. I did a workshop once just on the Michigan Constitution and how...your rights as citizens. About 25 or 30 people came, and we talked about the Michigan Constitution and pulled out the language that talked about the rights and powers of voters and how this was being subverted by politicians. And so, done at a level, but that's...that almost sounds textbook-ish, like a textbook exercise, not a political organizing tool, but I tend to believe that education is part of what needs to be done. And so, in our conversations, we talk about what we want and why we can't get what we want,

and, you know, who's in charge here, and I've asked this many--not in the last year or so, but during this whole period--I always ask people, "Who is the ultimate authority in this city? Who is the ultimate authority?" And, you know, some people hesitate, and others are straight out, "The people are." And a few people would think, "Well, the mayor and city council are." But, most people would recognize that the citizens are the ultimate authority. Say then, "Who is responding to your demands based on the fact you are the ultimate authority?" And, I just...I would just leave that, you know, put that out there, and I still think that [clears throat] those questions should be asked.

And, I truthfully, in the last year or so, I haven't raised this with people in the way that I used to, and I probably should not be holding back. It's not like I'm holding back. It's just that the crisis, those times of three to five years ago, you know, consent agreement, bankruptcy, the dismantling of our schools, those were all pregnant questions in a public realm in a way that they aren't at the moment. So, I just ask people to assume the power of their citizenship. [laughs] That's how I always have done that and offered opportunities. This event is going on, this rally is going on, here's a way that you can express...these are vehicles for you to express yourself. And, I'll never know fully how many people did that, how effective it was, but...and I tried to bring other people into the discussions to come talk to you and, you know, because you can't be one person and let people see that there are teams of people working on this, that this is a movement in the sea. And, that's kind of what I...how I approached it in my neighborhoods.

[1:05:26]

PB: So, within this--this is taking a slightly different tack--but within this larger context of struggles for control over Detroit's public assets and the consent agreement, can you talk about the creation of Great Lakes Water Authority and how that played into the bankruptcy proceedings and what that looked like for Detroiters?

RB: Sure. The Great Lakes Water Authority could not exist under the Michigan Constitution because the Michigan Constitution again said that the future and the control of public utilities, whether they're water, power, heat, or light, were

decisions to be made by citizens of those localities, and there are a number of cities in Michigan that have their own power utilities and even more water utilities, and those were protected by the clause in the Constitution. So, the bankruptcy allowed the... The bankruptcy gave a legal vehicle to the governor to do what certain constituents had wanted for decades, and that was to take the system Detroit built away from the citizens of Detroit.

And, you know, that campaign started in 1970, and I don't...I don't know if I'm repeating myself here, but let me just quickly say this: that in the 1950s and the 1960s, the State of Michigan public health officials were sanctioning cities like Livonia [Michigan] and western Wayne County [Michigan]--and in the [19]60s, Macomb [County, Michigan] and Oakland County [Michigan]--and telling them they can no longer do housing development and other residential and other kinds of development because they had not developed a sewerage system and a sanitary system to handle the population that they had. Livonia actually had--in the summer--had water shortages, and not only were they saying don't water your lawn. They couldn't water their lawn. [laughs] They didn't...they weren't allowed to open up the schools that they built because they couldn't...they didn't have enough water pressure for fire safety, and they weren't allowed to occupy new residential homes that were built. And Livonia, the mayor at the time, said to Detroit, "Please send us water. " Now, in all these counties, none of these communities wanted to build their own systems, and they said, "It's too expensive. We want Detroit to do it."

And so, all eight counties--I believe it was eight--came together along with state and federal officials and spent two years mulling over the whole question of the water and wastewater systems and public health and the future of the region, which they projected was gonna grow astronomically population-wise [school bell rings] and...which they projected would grow astronomically population-wise, and they all came to the conclusion that Detroit should build the regional system because nobody else could do it, and nobody else was willing to pay the money to build their own systems.

And so despite some resistance within the city to do this, it moved forward, and Detroit built the water mains out to western Wayne County. They funded...it was done through bonds the city of Detroit negotiated and took the financial risk on, and same with Oakland and Macomb County, and all of this allowed for the ability

for western Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb County populations to grow along with the freeway developments. And without that, there wouldn't have been the suburban growth that depopulated Detroit. And so, Detroit built the system, and then... But, the warning in the mid-[19]50s that if we build this, then they're eventually going to say that they should control it. That's what the director of the Water Department [Laurence Lenhardt] said. He didn't want to build the system out beyond the 46 communities that we were already serving. He said, "I don't want to build out anymore because they'll try and take it from us." He was fired [laughed] for that, and...but in 1970, his prediction came true.

A number of suburban communities came together and used the resources, and they started lobbying the legislature to take the water from the city of Detroit, but the Constitution doesn't allow it. In some ways, they were pandering to their own citizens, you know, against the city. And, this is when Roman Gribbs was still mayor, and then that continued through the [19]70s. The Drain Commissioner of Oakland County, George Kuhn, was the primary person in the region pushing for the stripping of Detroit Water Department from the city, and he kept it up and kept it up, and he renewed it in 1993 with Senate Bill 85 that created...that was gonna create this new regional authority and so forth, and the bills didn't go anywhere. And every two years, the bill would... Every new legislature session, they would get introduced, you know, [19]93, [19]97, [19]99, 2001, and 2002.

[1:11:43]

Again... And so, this was all...this...the news coverage... Again, in the early [19]90s, the Detroit Free Press editorialized against these takeover legislation measures. And they said, "This is basically being motivated by suburban politicians who wanted to get their hands on contracts, and this is about money." But, the news coverage in later years would often put the Water Department in a negative light even when the facts didn't justify it. Sometimes there were mistakes, you know. They got to take their hits like everybody else, the Water Department, that is. But, they were repeating stories and putting stuff in stories that wasn't true. And when--later on, when Victor Mercado was hired as the Water Department Director, all the blame was put on Kwame Kilpatrick as mayor for what he did, and everybody said the water department did this.

What was actually true and didn't really appear substantially in the coverage--or practically at all in the coverage--was that Victor Mercado was actually hired by the federal judge and was an employee of the federal court system, and so this corruption that he did was under direct supervision of a federal judge. The mayor didn't hire him. The mayor didn't know who he was when he was selected. The judge imposed him on the city. But during all the media coverage of it, you never saw the judge's name ever brought into the story because let's make Detroit look bad. So, you know, we had...had those kind of things and that created, you know, over time that kind of has an indoctrinating effect. People think the water department is mismanaged. There is plenty of data to show that stuff is false. But, I think Rick Snyder saw that he could gain political points because remember this bankruptcy is prior to his election [laughs], right? He could gain political points by giving the suburbs this control.

And, it will also be remembered when he first put this out, the bankruptcy proceedings, I think a little perhaps to his surprise, [L.] Brooks Patterson said--Oakland County Executive--said, "I'm not sure we want to take the Water Department from the city of Detroit," after he had been mouthing stuff to the opposite because he said, "Well, won't we be obligated to their debt?" [laughs] And, the Macomb Executive Mark Hackel said the same thing, and he was even stronger about it, and if our current mayor Mike Duggan hadn't persuaded him, they weren't going to create the Great Lakes Water Authority. And so, eventually it came into being with the help of...with a push from Rick Snyder and then the support of the mayor, current mayor of Detroit [Mike Duggan]. They created this. But, I know that there's still some misgivings, and, you know, in Macomb County about whether this is a good idea.

But, that creation, again, could only be done through the bankruptcy process, and it was done in such a way as to create options for the Great Lakes Water Authority to take over ownership of the Detroit system because you can't use...there wasn't enough legal foundation to say that they can take ownership. So, what they took is the rights of ownership, which is what they do under emergency management. They take the rights of ownership, but they can't take ownership, whether it's a school district or--now, they can dissolve it. They've destroyed school districts in the state of Michigan, completely dismantled them, all in African American communities. But with the water system, they can't just dismantle that. [laughs]

It's gotta operate every second of the year, you know. And so, they just reappropriated it and put in all these lethal pills in the agreement, saying if Detroit doesn't make these payments or do this, this, and that, then it loses control over the system. And so, it was an incremental approach, stealing assets from one people and giving them to another that are your political base.

[1:17:03]

PB: So, I want to check to make sure I'm getting this right because this is kind of a lingering perception I've had about this. So, Snyder--from your perspective, Snyder is appealing to his suburban base and using the DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] as a possible gift. L. Brooks Paterson and other suburban leaders say, "Yeah, that's great, but we don't want the debt." And then, in order to lessen that debt and collect on that, the city starts shutting off people's water as a way to force payment. So, is that accurate based on your knowledge of that? Because that's... So, there's direct suburban... Isn't there direct complicity in the water shut off because they wanted to lessen the debt to secure better conditions?

RB: I think you're absolutely right. What they wanted to do with the shutoff policy is make it look like Detroiters were going to pay the consequences of Detroit debt. But, I think the shutoff policy was also for another reason. They wanted--and this wouldn't have been in any public forum--but they wanted to create a...conditions to make it attractive for a private company to take over the operation of the system at a profit. And so, we got rid of those customers that can't afford to pay their bills. We jacked up the rates enormously. I mean, you know, the rates just started going through the roof, and then they...this is the time that they're taking a drainage fee and going from a meter-based rate to an acreage-based rate, and, you know, collecting millions and millions of dollars more. And, they start also at that time trying to shift new customers from being residents and occupants, which is what it would say normally on a water bill, to having names which requires social security numbers, which is not legal. The federal privacy act does not allow that.

And yeah, so I won't go into a side discussion on that, but the purpose of creating customer identities instead of occupant and resident billing and greatly inflating rates was all to make this more attractive to privatization. And, you know, the massive shutoffs were part of that, see, you don't have to carry these people. We'll get rid of them for you and make it easy to take over our operations and start making a profit off of people's health needs. The Water Department of course isn't the only example of that [laughs] by any means, but, you know, it hasn't gone that far, and I don't know what all the deliberations are now, but I think they're still evolving in that direction.

[1:20:15]

PB: So, you mentioned the rain tax, and we didn't touch on that last time, so I was hoping we could...

RB: Yeah.

PB: That's like what you're really focused on at this particular moment too. Would you kind of give us...give us a crash course, a 101 course on the rain tax and the organizing work that's going on and how it works and what's going on?

RB: Sure. In the 1980s, the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] started pressing the city to...on storm water management. Basically, the system that the city built allowed large volumes of rainfall to be mixed with sanitary flow in the sewers, and when it couldn't be handled by the wastewater plant, the floodgates would open along Detroit and the River Rouge rivers, and it would be discharged into the waterways, and that was considered unsanitary, which it is. And so, the feds started saying you've gotta come up with a different system. And so, there was a small... When they started saying, you know, you've got to start coming up with a different system and get dedicated revenue going into that effort. And so, that was the origin of it, but it was a very small amount for decades.

And then as we went through the bankruptcy and the takeover, it started going up a little more when Kwame Kilpatrick and Dave Bing were mayors. By the time Dave Bing was mayor, it was nine dollars a month on a residence for the average resident, and it was based on the water meter size going into your house. So if you have a five-eighths meter, it's going to be nine dollars, and that's what the standard residents had. So, if you're a business with a two inch line, you're paying obviously more, but it wasn't like thousands of dollars a month, [laughs] okay?

And so, what the city did in the last...starting in 2016 is after taking photographs of every parcel in the city with a drone aircraft, they started calculating the acreage of every parcel and deciding which percentage of that parcel did not absorb rainwater into the ground and then made a calculation into how much they were gonna start charging everybody, and that methodology has never been... There's never been a full exposition of the methodology and the policy assumptions around that and the science around it, and the charges, for most cases, in September of 2016 just started hitting people new blank, you know, very little advance information. They made some changes based on public reaction, like initially they were charging for vacant lots, you know, which pretty much absorbed rain water, you know. But, they backed away from that, but they started charging rates on churches and businesses and residents that came out to roughly 600 dollars a month per acre. And so, some churches, a handful of churches, were charged in the 80,000 dollars a year rate. Some businesses were charged over 100,000 dollars a year even though--and I know of a number of examples where those...the property of those businesses are primarily dirt. There are no sewers anywhere nearby. Nothing is going into the sewerage system, but they're still being charged, and the city says, "Even if you do everything we say and create this so-called green infrastructure where you use our contractors and hire landscape architects and hydraulic engineers"--which of course is expensive--"and you create this green infrastructure, then we'll reduce your charge some."

And as I've repeatedly said to folks at the water department, you can't...state law says you can only charge for a service provided. You can't say because rainfall fell on the back 40 that somehow you have a claim that you provided a service that you can collect money for. You can't do that, but they are doing it, and they're doing it widespread. And, I live near very close to the M4 industrial zone, which is very large. It goes from 6 Mile to 8 Mile, and it's between Sherwood and Mt. Elliott Road, so it covers a huge amount of territory, and for... Industrial zone is

heavy industry, allows virtually any kind of activity on it, heavy industry. So, we've got metal processing, grill suppliers, and so forth. We also have commercial shops on Van Dyke and other places, and these owners are all saying the same thing the pastors were saying in 2017: they're trying to get my land. Because they'd say, "If you don't pay this, we're going to put it on your property taxes, but it's not a tax." But, legal findings say it's a voluntary fee, which is incredibly insulting to the intelligence of anybody who knows anything about what's going on.

But, they threatened to take people to court and take their property from them if they don't pay it, which motivates many in the business community and the pastoral community to believe that the goal is to take the property so that they can do these land assemblies from land and for other businesses like the FCA [Fiat Chrysler Automobiles] deal. And I'm, you know, I'm glad to see the jobs coming and the vacant land being used for economic development and jobs for Detroit, and Detroiters are really being prioritized in the hiring, which is not normal. In the case of Ilitch, it doesn't exist at all. But, to vacate land for other potential users that are being used now, the drainage fee is being seen as the instrument to pursue that, and if people do pay their bills--and we are talking thousands and thousands of dollars a month in cases where there's land--the city still sees that as a positive for them, obviously. And so, they're collecting... In this current fiscal year that began July 1, they're anticipating collection for rainfall on private property is 154 million dollars. I said private property, but there's some public property too, libraries, schools, even the Recreation Department part of their budget goes to the Water Department for rainfall recreation centers.

So, 154 million is to be collected. Well, compare that to the water that we take out of the Detroit River and goes through a multi-stage treatment process and get pumped at high pressure to be delivered to your home in a disinfected safe condition. And, I think that's a generally true description of what people get with the Detroit water system. They're only collecting a little over a 100 million dollars for that service. So, how can rainfall cost 50 percent more than the daily supply of water in the whole system?

Another useful comparison is to look at the drainage fee revenues and compare it to the sanitary flow. Now, obviously sanitary flow occurs every second in a city system. We have no brakes in that at all no matter if there's rainfall or not, and it's hundreds of millions of gallons a day of sanitary flow, and sanitary flow is obviously something that needs a lot of treatment, a lot of disinfection, and it has to go through multiple stages. Rainfall falls from the sky without needing disinfection. Now, when it hits the street, it may pick up some dirt on the street and get a little muddy. But even under the worst conditions, it costs three or more times as much as sanitary flow to treat rainfall. Yet with the high volume of daily sanitary flow in Detroit and the episodic nature of rain and the requirement of that sanitary flow over here required extensive treatment and this stuff requires minimal treatment, they're collecting 156 million for sanitary flow and 154 [million] for rainfall. And, the numbers just don't jive. It just doesn't jive at all. In other words, they're saying 50 percent of the cost of the sewage for water and sewage wastewater system is rainfall, and that's simply not true. It's not honest.

Now, the one thing I'll say a little on Detroit's behalf on that is when this was under federal judge John Feikens, the guy who hired Victor Mercado, he pulled a number--an arbitrary number according to people who were knowledgeable about this--he had about what percentage of storm water in the whole regional system was obligated to be paid by Detroit residents because the suburbs said, "We don't combine our sanitary flow and our rainfall. Our storm sewers all go into public bodies of water, into rivers and creeks and stuff like that. So, you know, that's a Detroit problem." And so, Judge Feikens said that for the entire regional system, Detroit had to pay 83 percent of the cost of stormwater management. And so, some of this drainage fee is that, but that decision was back in [19]79, so even with the small amounts we were paying during the Coleman Young and Dennis Archer years, that was supposed to be covering that 83 percent cost. So, how does it balloon into something that costs a resident of a relatively small property 17 dollars a month, you know, it goes up to 23? We have people in our area that are paying 40 to 50 dollars a month for rainfall on their property. You know, it's just an average house. That's... For many people, that's a tripling or quadrupling of what the drainage fee was just in 2010. How do you show that there's new costs to justify any of that? Or is this just an opportunity to raise money? And where is that money going? That's still an under-evaluated question. It needs more research.

But, the reason it's important is its potential for overtaxing residents and businesses, of driving out employers from the city, which means weakening the tax base of the city and the taxes that support our libraries and our schools. And, I know businesses that in our area are already talking to residents, real estate agents about finding places. I know one business that he already has it. I won't say more about it than this, but he's already got the property he wants in Macomb County, and he's ready to leave. He's got acres of land that he pays property tax on, and the city won't be collecting that anymore. And, you know, then it becomes a question of the city taking the property, and do they do like the FCA deal where they gift it to a billionaire 'developer' quote unquote? They're not developers, they're exploiters.

But, this is what is going on. This is what citizens can't see because nobody's covering this in the media, or at least not adequately. I think there has been some criticism published on some of this, but it doesn't seem to get the scrutiny that it needs. And so, I spend more time on it because others aren't spending time on it. And, there is a suit before the Michigan Supreme Court. Trapper's Alley has filed an amicus brief in support of that suit asking the Supreme Court to hear it, and they get a deposition of the person who was the city's financial assessor when Kevyn Orr was the emergency manager, and he told them that the drainage fee was done in a very slipshod way, that it was very uneven, that it was chaotic, that it wasn't rationally put together, and discredited the policies that are around the drainage fees now. And, he was Kevyn Orr's financial assessor, property assessor manager. So, I think there's still a story to be told on that, and I think we... I'd like to talk now, if I can, also about the Flint [Michigan] dimension...

PB: I was just gonna ask you about that.

RB: ...of that--yeah, if that's okay.

PB: Please. Please.

RB: [clears throat] The...

PB: Just to give you a heads up, it's ten to 11.

RB: Okay.

PB: I'm not sure what your time looks like. We can keep going as long as you want to go.

RB: Okay, alright.

PB: So...

RB: Yeah, I'm not in a hurry.

PB: Okay.

[1:36:36]

RB: 'Cause I just have to work if I leave, so I don't mind a good excuse to stay. But, let me cover this 'cause this...the Flint water crisis was...became such a indefensible issue for the...in terms of the role of the governor that the governor appointed one of these so-called blue ribbon commissions to investigate the crisis and its origins. And, I don't know what he expected. I suspect he thought he was going to come out looking clean, but he didn't. And...but, one of the things that the commission said is that it was beyond the scope of their research to look at this, but in terms of the origins of the Flint water crisis, the origins of the Karegnondi Water Authority needed to be examined further, kind of almost like the end of the sentence. [laughs] And, to my knowledge, none of the organizations ever picked that up and have gone into that.

So, here's what my research showed. This is based on the minutes of the meeting of the Karegnondi Water Authority, and some interviews from folks I know up there, and some knowledge, historical knowledge of the role of the Genesee Drain Commissioner vis-à-vis the Detroit water system. And so, that's kind of the situation in which I make the assertions I am about to make. The Karegnondi Water Authority is a creation of Genesee County [Michigan] Drain Commissioner Jeffrey Wright, a Democrat, and he was historically antagonistic to the Detroit Water and Sewerage system, and he envisioned creating a water system that would compete with and help undermine the Detroit system. In the creation of this, he--and I'll just say 'appears' to have had some discussions with gubernatorial candidate Rick Snyder in 2010. And immediately after Rick Snyder was elected and took office in 2011, contacts were being made between Rick Snyder's key advisors, like Rich Baird and others. Richard Baird was the one who was trying to redesign and reengineer and restructure government-funded activities such as education and cities, and he was kind of like...sort of the Rasputin--a fairly negative term, I suppose--the Rasputin for Rick Snyder. He was the one doing the planning behind the scene for a lot of these schemes.

And so, they . . . the Karegnondi Water Authority gets incorporated, and it has five members on the board, and it's the mayor of Flint, it's the Genesee County Drain Commissioner--and politically those are Democrats, generally speaking. But, it also has the drain commissioners of Sanilac County [Michigan] and Lapeer County [Michigan] and the mayor of Lapeer [Michigan], who were always predictably Republican. And so, they're creating this authority to start competing with the Detroit system to put it under control of a different political party. But, they don't have any resources [laughs].

And so, their plan is to build a pipeline from Lake Huron to duplicate the kind of water delivery that Detroit does. But, Detroit built a water facility and treated the water that came out of Lake Huron before it sent it to Flint or Oakland [County] or northern Macomb County, and they built the water main that comes out of that plant and goes to Imlay City [Michigan] is 10 feet in diameter. You can literally drive a truck through that water main, and it pumps the water at 200 pounds of pressure per square inch, which is three times the pressure of a truck tire, right? It's a very powerful system. And then, from Imlay City, a 96 inch main goes south to feed northern Oakland and Macomb County. It spreads out that way, and it comes right down the dividing line between the counties pretty much, Dequindre

area. And then, a 72 inch main went into the Flint area and fed the greater Flint area and other customers in Genesee County.

And by comparison, Karegnondi Water Authority was gonna build a pumping station on the river and send raw water into Genesee County, and it asked cities to buy the raw water, and then they would have to build their own treatment plants. Well, going back to the 1950s, none of these communities wanted to build their own treatment plants. It's expensive, you know, and there's liability, you know. Let somebody else take that liability, like Detroit. So, they found it difficult to get customers, to put it mildly. Even the mayor of Lapeer, who's on the governing board of Karegnondi Water Authority, couldn't get his city council to agree to that kind of stupid idea. And, they were hoping well, utilities would buy the water 'cause they don't need treated water to cool, you know, to run turbines and so forth. Well, actually, they do. If you have high pressure turbines, those...the power boilers in a power plant create 5,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, you know, with steam pressure, and those hit turbine blades and that's what turns the turbine that turns the generator that converts it to electricity. You can't have unclean water, you know, going in there because that will hit the turbine blade and erode the turbine blade. So, they really do want clean water [laughs] in those systems, but they sold the idea that the utilities could use this untreated water. Now, Lake Huron water is fairly clean, but it's not as clean as it should be. It's not filtered and so forth, right?

So, the customer base wasn't showing up, and they projected that when they had this right of way, that they were also going to claim the mineral rights of this with the potential of doing fracking, underground mining, and so forth. So, there were all sorts of side schemes and quote 'business opportunities' for these people putting this together, but they still had to build a pipeline and didn't have any money to do it. You saw immediately after Rick Snyder takes office that the treasury department and the agriculture department are getting with the Karegnondi Water Authority and supporting the water project, which obviously is coming from the Governor's office, and Rick Snyder puts emergency managers over Flint, a series of emergency managers, and they make the decision to start using...buying water from...through Genesee County in order to finance the Karegnondi Water Authority pipeline. And so in order to do that, they would have to quit using Detroit water.

[1:45:27]

And so, they go to the Flint water, and those of us that worked in the system, you know, didn't have direct contact with Flint, but we all knew the story that the water was so acidic and so polluted in the 1960s that Detroit...they asked Detroit to sell them water, and we started in 1967, six years before we built the plant up there. So, two of our Detroit plants, Northeast on 8 Mile and the Springwells plant, were shooting water up Dequindre Avenue from Detroit all the way up to Flint for six years before this new plant came on. That's how desperate they were to get off that Flint River [laughs] water, okay? So, the switch back to this had nothing to do with public health or saving a few dollars because Detroit was giving them the best price, and you will hear it said in Genesee County, "Detroit was ripping us off."

But, Detroit did rate studies and published them--and they were never refuted--that showed that the municipalities in Genesee County were marking up 300 to 400 percent of the Detroit costs, and Detroit's wholesale costs were among the 20 lowest in the nation. We were really often among the lowest ten in the nation for wholesale costs to people. Detroit generated a lot of revenue, but it also generated huge costs that was paid for by it, and the law did not allow any of that money to be shared with the rest of the City of Detroit general fund. So, any surplus that was left over was folded back the next year towards discounting the wholesale costs for the next fiscal year. It wasn't turned over to the City of Detroit and never intermixed. The only thing the Water Department paid Detroit for was some costs to the Human Services Department for doing the hiring because the Human Resources Department of the city hired all city employees. And so, they had to pay some reimbursement for that, and they supplied some water to Belle Isle through a pipeline under the Detroit River. Those were the only costs that Detroit received from it.

But, people were already believing their local politicians, like Jeffrey Wright. They were open to something that changed from Detroit from something else, but nobody bargained for going back to the Flint River. And as has been well documented, they never prepared that treatment plant in Flint to handle the Detroit River. The treatment plant that was in Flint, the one they used to use,

wasn't prepared to handle this new task, but it was a mandate to build a pipe system. So, they went ahead and had... So, it was to the... They couldn't sell construction bonds to build the Karegnondi pipeline from Lake Huron to Genesee County again without having the revenue source to pay the bonds.

And so, that's why the emergency managers went to the Flint River and cut Detroit out. And in the minutes and other you know, Jeffrey Wright says, you know, "We're gonna take away the customers of the Detroit system in Oakland and Macomb County. You know, we're gonna be the new empire, you know?" Drain Commissioner somehow--because, you know, the word drain is in their title. It's not really, you know, an impressive title. So, they always want to build these empires to Macomb and Oakland County. George Kuhn in Oakland County, Jeffrey Wright in Genesee County. Most commissioners just want to do their job, but these guys were empire builders, you know. There... Some public works directors come up from Macomb County, Tom Walsh--you know, long since retired--supported the Detroit system. He always told us that, anybody, including legislators. You know, Detroit helped build Macomb County, [laughs] and Detroit has done a fantastic job. They're not ripping people off, and, you know, we got some lying racist politicians who will tell you that they're doing it, but they're not. [laughs] You know? There were always some straight shooters out there, too.

But, the consequences of that decision have never been put at the doorstep of Jeffrey Wright, of Rick Snyder, the Treasury Department. Andy Dillion was one of the people who was targeted, but the agriculture director wasn't--I don't believe--was targeted, and all these people who are proper targets of the investigation, instead of going after this guy who was an operator in the plant who didn't make any dire decisions or any decisions at all about this system being put in place. And so, I think that's a framework that needs to be looked at by the Attorney General and, frankly, federal prosecutors too, as well as civil litigators. Because it was done to...in a quick fashion without proper preparation of treatment and without recognizing historically that they couldn't treat the water to a satisfactory level, that's why they needed the Detroit water system. And, they just threw all that aside so they could build the new empire of Karegnondi and possibly bring the...they were looking at bringing in food processing systems because they said they preferred... I mean, raw water rather than treated water, and I don't understand that, but that's what they say. They were hoping to get

food processing plants built along the pipeline in addition to exploring the mineral rights.

So, they were looking at business opportunities in terms of the Karegnondi Water Authority, which is just another strike against what they were...what was really truly motivating them. There was never any, even a pretense or a claim, that they were gonna provide a better health product at a lower costs to the residents. That was never...that was never part of the story because it wasn't true, and they couldn't make the case that it was true. And frankly, with those...those rates being charged at those highly inflated numbers, they wanted that money for themselves. [laughs] So, they weren't going to promise to cut rates. Maybe initially they did, but later on they didn't. And, they wrote the bylaws so that no matter what community signed on and got on their board, that the initial five that started this were the ones that controlled everything. They controlled the director. They controlled the contracts and everything. So, it was always going to be under the control of the political party associated with Rick Snyder.

[1:53:17]

PB: Do you have any hope that there won't be any repercussions for the folks that participated in the lawsuits?

RB: Yeah, uh huh. I've done several presentations on this in more detail because I was fresher with the minutes and the research and so forth. But, I don't know if anyone else is really taking up the issue with Flint. But, I think with a new Attorney General that it's a good time to open all this up again and have it all re-examined. I wouldn't be surprised if they know a lot more about it than I do already, but there hasn't been any hint of that publicly.

[1:54:03]

PB: Have you been contacted at all as part of that lawsuit?

RB: No. Only the DAART [Detroit Alliance Against Rain Tax] lawsuit against the drainage fees.

[1:54:12]

PB: I also want to ask--and this is moving away from water related, I guess, partially--but about your run for city council in 2018.

RB: Oh.

PB: Can you talk about your decision to run and a little bit about what that campaign was like?

RB: I'll talk about the decision to run. [laughs] I don't know how much I want to relive any of the rest of it. The city charter created these council by districts that were first realized in the 2013 election. And in District 3, where I live, there was an incumbent who upon taking office saw to immediately get rid of a recreation center that our community had fought for years to have built and was relatively...still relatively new. And, I mean, there was a many year campaign--and this is the...this is the recreation center on Seven... Excuse me, I mean Van Dyke just immediately north of Seven Mile, a 15-acre site, and there had long been the Lipke Recreation Center named after the two brothers who... It started in the early [19]50s named after two brothers who lived in the neighborhood who died in World War II, and they, the Lipke Recreation Center, grew into a... Through constant community engagement, [laughs] it grew into a large building with an Olympic-sized swimming pool. We had a baseball diamond out there. We didn't... The fields were still relatively undeveloped. A full basketball court, beautiful basketball court, and we had baseball, football, and basketball athletics for youth there and lots of trophies in the cases to attest to the dedication of the youth and adults who coached and made this all happen.

And so, when the incumbent got...won office in 2013, his task was to...he was allied with a millionaire investor who wanted to take the property and create a private business development on it. It would have destroyed the neighborhoods because on each... There are two residential streets on the north and south borders of the Lipke Recreation Center, and one side is the Lipke Recreation Center and on the other side are residences. So, what you put there has to be compatible with residents. What this millionaire investor was going to put there was an amusement park [laughs], which would have destroyed the neighborhood, and he kept pushing for--his name was Scott Benson--he kept pushing people to support declaring this property as surplus property of the city, which means we don't need it anymore, and he got city council to go along with that without a lot of curiosity. Brenda Jones was against it, and Raquel Castañeda-López was against it. At the time, Janeé Ayers was not on city council. It was Saunteel Jenkins in that seat, and they voted to declare it surplus property.

And, we challenged the mayor [Mike Duggan] on why he was supporting it. The mayor had just taken office a few months before, and, of course, this was not one of the details that came to the fore with everything else going on in the world. And so, long story short, the mayor stopped the sale, and... But prior to that, Benson had been going to community groups all over trying to sell the idea of getting rid of the Lipke Recreation Center, which was not well received as you can imagine, and our coalition, Save Lipke Coalition, was formed and engaged many people in the fight, [loud car drives by] mostly like block club types like myself and my neighboring block club, Ken Davis, and Northtown CDC, Community Development Corporation, and the We Care [About Van Dyke-Seven Mile] Organization and Karen Washington and others.

And, we just kept it up, and, you know, we won that fight. But, if it hadn't been for the mayor making that decision at that time--and we didn't anticipate him doing that. We were surprised, happily surprised--we would have lost that. And, the Salvation Army was gonna take it over, but the chairman of the board was Errol Service, the millionaire investor. And so, while the Salvation Army apparently was gonna use the building, the...most of the acreage was going to go to this amusement park 'cause we had talked to the Salvation Army about it. They weren't going to use the Recreation Department for recreation.

And so, it was a dead end, and we don't have recreation for the kids--organized recreation--for miles in our area. You know, if you take away Lipke, you know, there's nothing. Right now, Lipke is performing a lot of youth engagement services, athletic programs, you know. They got donations for a national football league, a standard football field which was subsidized by, you know, by various people, Matt Stafford from the Detroit Lions, and I think the football league contributed some money. And, the same thing happened with a baseball field on the backside, you know. So, a lot of upgrades have occurred because of that.

[2:00:45]

But, Scott Benson has never apologized or admitted that he was wrong in anything that he did in that regard. And then, he started... When the drainage fees came along in 2016 and he was asked about it in a community meeting, he said, "You pay for water when it goes in your house, you pay for water when it leaves your house, and you pay for water when it runs--when it comes from the sky." Everybody immediately said, "Water from the sky? We pay for that?" And, they looked at each other, and he didn't want to hear anybody's issues about drainage fees. And, you know, when it came to community service, he was pretty unresponsive. They didn't return my phone calls, and there were many other issues as well.

And so, I had been going to community meetings from one end of the district to the other for a variety of reasons and topics, and, you know, developed relationships with a lot of people on the issues, the school district issues and the drainage fee issues and the bankruptcy issues, [laughs] Lipke and other recreation center issues. And so, people asked me to run, and some people made promises and commitments that made it look feasible. In the end, they didn't follow through with those commitments, and it made it difficult to...without those commitments. But when I made the decision to run, it was based on the understanding that certain commitments would be executed, and the issues...it would give me a chance to talk about the issues in more forums, and, you know, defeating an incumbent is always a challenge. Of course, you know, what I'll call the downtown power structure backed him.

Oh, the other issue... The other issue that drove this was the community benefits agreements issue, and you may remember that the Detroit People's Platform and others had done a petition campaign to amend the city charter to put in a strong community benefits agreement into the city charter that would have mandated that when the city puts resources into an economic development, whether it's a called Ilitch Arena or whatever, that they have to negotiate with the community to give back, and that it's legally binding, and Scott Benson quickly put something before city council against the will of the president of the city council and asked city council to approve to put a competing measure on the ballot. And then, the developers funded TV ads to kill our...to kill the citizen-initiated proposal and backed Benson's proposal.

And, Benson was working strictly for the developers in town business development interests against the people, and it was...the language of his proposal was so extreme. When he goes around, he's always been challenged when it comes to his ability to tell the truth. I'll say it as nicely as I can, but he's told people, "Well, you know, my proposal has resulted in all these jobs." If you actually read his proposal, it says that the community...people who lived within 300 feet of a community can form a community advisory committee, and they have the right to meet with the developer one time to express their concerns, and they cannot demand a second meeting with the developer unless it was approved by city council. [laughs] What?!? That's the Scott Benson proposal that was put on the ballot and because, you know, it was many pages, most 99 percent of the voters didn't read it. They--which is what 90 percent of what most voters do anyway everywhere in the country or in the world. They don't read 17 pages on a ballot proposal.

So, and all the TV ads were saying "A,"--which is the citizen proposal--"Proposal A will kill jobs. Proposal B will support job development, you know. Vote about this!" So, I stood in line at... I stood in a voting site that I knew was a high turnout site in my immediate area and talked to people about that ballot issue and so forth, as well as my campaign, you know, and we tried to make sure people knew what was going on. So, we were able to get precinct results that we had an effect explaining to them what was really on the ballot. And so, those were the kind of things that just turned people against Scott Benson by--I mean, people who were active and engaged, you know.

And, that attitude continues to exist today, but he uses the money he raises to do things like movie nights, bingo games, and marshmallow drops, and that's his public outreach. He doesn't go there to say, "I'm going to help you with your foreclosure problem or all these other things." He gives lip service to it, but he basically doesn't perform, doesn't return calls. His reputation is well-established in this area, but most people don't call city council to get things, and they think, "We got an incumbent councilman. The newspaper endorses him and stuff like that, and, you know." And, he does have lots of money to do mailings. If you look at the primary election results, the primary election files after 2017, you'll see that 100 percent of his money came outside the district. It came from Oakland County, Macomb County, Lansing [Michigan], and downtown Detroit, mostly...mostly Oakland and Macomb County, and that's who he represents. That's why I ran.

[2:07:23]

PB: I understand the Moroun family had a fairly sizable impact on that election as well.

RB: Who?

PB: The Morouns.

RB: I suspect...I believe that to be true. Yeah, and there's a lot that could be said about Matty Moroun, but I don't want to go through a frivolous lawsuit, and I don't want you guys to go through a frivolous lawsuit by telling the truth about Matty Moroun. [deep breath] I'll leave it at that. [pause] But, he's corrupt, ...

PB: I would say you're free to go on.

RB: ...evil.

PB: I don't want you to have to go through it if you don't have to...

RB: Yeah.

PB: ...worry about it.

RB: Huh, yeah. I know you've got some resources too, yeah. Well, I encourage you to look at the story when Mayor [Ronald L.] Bonkowski ran the city of Warren [Michigan]. There's a story you should look at about the explosion of a waste transfer station and who immediately got the contract to haul the waste within 24 hours after that station mysteriously exploded. I encourage people to look at that story 'cause they want to know who Matty Maroun is, you know, look at that story.

[2:08:44]

PB: So, from that election... We can use that election, that campaign as an example if you want. But, given that you've mentioned a lot about your emphasis on political education, Constitution, and the citizen powers and strengths, what do you see as the possibility as well as the shortcomings of electoral politics as an avenue for popular and powerful social transformation?

RB: Well, electoral politics are not a vehicle for education. I mean, if you want to spend 10[000] or 20,000 dollars on a campaign just to do political education, don't expect to win. You can use it as a vehicle. That's what the green party does, and, you know, other independent candidates do. You can use it as a way of, you know, addressing a wider audience that you wouldn't normally talk to, and there's some value in that. But, in terms... But at the same time, you are also demonstrating to some that raising those issues leads to sure defeat in the election. So, it's...it has those risks, but on the other hand, there are a lot of people that can't be reached any other way, [laughs] right, in neighborhoods and, right, in block clubs and community associations and so forth. But, putting a campaign to really raise issues

that challenge the hegemony of the current power structure still takes a lot of money to get that message out, you know, because voters do need repetition, and the rule of the thumb is they need to see your name and hear your name at least seven times before, you know, they retain it when they go to the voting booth. Mailing, interviews, roll calls--which of course aren't very popular with many voters, but, you know, they put your name out there, and if you have a short quick one with something interesting to say, it's okay.

But, roll calls won't educate voters. [laughs] You can tell them about an event. You can tell them something your incumbent opponent just did at City Council, you know, that will outrage them. You know, you can do a few things with robocalls, but most...it has to...most foremost, it has to be voter contact. It has to be the door knocking and going to meetings and events and making your case. If you look at the 2017 primary, the people who didn't do hardly any of that, you know, were in the five to six percent range, you know. And so, I encourage people to not be vanity candidates, [laughs] get your name on the ballot when you don't have a reasonable plan and a platform to challenge an incumbent. But, a lot of people run as vanity candidates. They don't have a chance, and they probably know they don't have a chance. They're just going to do it because they want to do it, you know, and they really think of themselves as important. And, you know, I would like to see...

And the other problem is that the Detroit media really doesn't look at local elections very much at all. There was one opportunity that the Detroit News afforded and one that the Detroit Free Press afforded. The Free Press did--in the general election, not the primary--in the general election that each candidate interview, you know, sit down and be interviewed and respond. They put about a four-minute interview on their website for people to see. And the news coverage... And a lot of more people get their... Detroit News and the Free Press aren't their primary source of news. It's the local stations, and [Channels] 2, 4, 7 didn't do anything on local elections. So, you know, if you don't have the resources to generate your own stories in terms of why you're running and what the issues are and create name recognition, it's not going to be done through through media that was historically responsible for educating voters and bringing it to attention who they were for better or for worse, you know. It just doesn't get done anymore in the fourth estate.

So, that's why you gotta raise more money, and that goes back to problems of money and elections. You know, you gotta be owned. I just heard a candidate say--a candidate for 2020--saying he thinks he has to raise a couple hundred thousand dollars for a local race within our district, you know. There's only a couple people to go to for that kind of money [laughs] in local elections here.

[2:14:57]

PB: So, with that kind of context, is it reasonable to believe that electoral politics are an avenue for achieving racial justice and self-determination in the city of Detroit?

RB: Well, I don't think any vehicle should be ignored, but I think that it's important to look at the level of civic education that's going in the public schools that reaches hundreds of thousands of students daily and forums where people can be reached where they're at, whether they're people struggling for jobs, people working in conditions that are substandard, janitors, security guards that are organizing now, working in those kind of campaigns. And, you know, a lot of what happens to us is done by voters outside of our city that we can't have a direct impact on. But if we're organizing across issues and lines that are less geographically inclined, we can organize people outside of the city, you know. I believe that there's a lot of people that would be fair-minded toward our city if they knew more of what was going on.

I know when I was organizing against the mayor of the City of Warren [Mark A. Steenbergh] against the water issues when he--early 2000s--I got invited by community groups to go to Warren and talk about the issues, and they were with Detroit. They were against the mayor. You know, they were talking about how corrupt their mayor was, land deals, stuff that he was doing. We said, "We don't believe him. He's a crook, you know." But, I don't, you know. In these are people like block club-type people and homeowner-type people who are usually seen as fairly conservative like, you know. But, you know, there's... I don't write anybody off, [laughs] but I think there's a natural constituency that needs to be organized, has to be organized around issues, and some of those issues have to touch...

Sometimes, you know, candidates and officeholders will legitimize an issue for people that feel they don't know, "Should I believe Russ [Bellant]? You know, he's a president of a block club, but what does that mean to me? I don't live in his neighborhood. Why should I believe him?" You know, but if you get some multiple people standing in positions to...in elected positions.

We've, you know, in the Benton Harbor [Michigan] school thing that just came up with Gretchen Whitmer that she...where she's going after... We've had elected officials from across the state standing against her on this, including a state rep in Detroit, and I think the legislative Black Caucus took a position against what she was doing too, and I think those elements are important because it broadens and gives a sense... I don't take my legitimacy for what I stand for based on what an elected candidate office holder says, but some people do, and it helps when those people are in a position to advance further because people are telling me, "Oh, I heard so-and-so say that, and I didn't know what to think before that, you know, and he said it, and it made sense, and I'm with it." So, I think...I think there's an arena. But, I'll tell you that the progressive movement in Detroit doesn't really want to engage that much in electoral politics, and they didn't...don't...won't do much to support you if you run for office.

PB: Why do you think that is?

RB: Don't know.

[2:19:37]

PB: What lessons would you offer to younger generations of activists and organizers in the city of Detroit?

RB: First, believe in the legitimacy of the people, the authority of the people, and the sovereignty of the people. And, un...understand it's part of life is knowing your environment and engaging your environment and making an environment that's healthy, sound for the education and advancement of the whole community. And,

don't be afraid of anybody. And, don't expect everybody to agree with you when you're right. [laughs]

[2:20:38]

PB: What . . . what's your vision for the future of this city that guides the work that you do?

RB: My vision for this city is that the community will become more aware of what's been done to them and be willing to stand for challenges to those that are trying to dismantle the city. I don't take it as an article of faith that that will happen. I take it as an article that I have a responsibility to help make it happen, and myself and the many, many others who want that to happen have a duty as a citizen to do what we have to do to win. And, you know, that's how I've lived my whole adult life. I don't worry about losing. We're gonna lose. We're gonna lose battles. The battles isn't your values. Your values have to determine your commitment and where you go and what you do, and if they're truly your values, you don't walk away when you lose. Those folks didn't listen to me. They didn't listen to me, oh, I give up. No, your values are that you give up, [laughs] that's what you just did. You surrendered. It's not acceptable. [rustling noises] Sorry.

[2:22:45]

PB: I guess, lastly, where do you see the...where do you see signs of hope in Detroit right now?

RB: Well, I see organizations still persevering: Detroit People's Platform, We the People, People's Water Board, neighborhood organizations and associations. I still see people making demands on the city system. I think that... I still see the current elected school board as being a little inaccessible, but I think there's probably...there's a better prospect of some things getting turned around, and it, you know, they were handed a horrible task from years of emergency management, and I'm hoping there will, you know, be some candidates running in

that race who want to better the system, but I think there's some renewed effort toward improving the schools, and those are all positive things to build on. We still have a challenge getting our kids into the schools, but that's I think...I think that that can be overcome, and I know I know many people talk to the young kids in our neighborhood about the importance of education and being involved. I do, and others do. I really am more focused on the things that are going to help the next generation than the old folks in my generation at some point. I feel in some ways that my generation has failed to do what my parent's generation did, you know, [laughs] and I want to focus on the younger people, see what can be passed down.

[2:25:24]

PB: Is there anything that we didn't touch on that you want to put on the record?

RB: [long pause] It's just been hard. That's all. I can't think of anything else except that I'm glad to have 40 years with my wife who has fully supported everything I've done. Yeah. Yeah.

PB: So, how can... With that in mind, like, how do you find the time to take care of yourself?

RB: Well, I'm retired, and so all my time is my own, and when I'm doing what I'm doing, I am taking care of myself, [laughs] you know, 'cause it's what I want to do. And, you know, if I moved to Traverse City [Michigan] or, you know, somewhere, I would feel like there's a gap or hole in my life because I wouldn't be doing anything meaningful. I'm sure there's issues out there. [laughs] There's issues everywhere, but, you know, whenever I read or study or see something new, I get charged and fired up, and I just don't want to abandon what I believe. I don't know how else to say it. It's what makes my life happy. I like doing crossword puzzles too. [laughs] But, you know, I... There's no... I don't watch television. I don't even have television. I don't watch it. It's a waste of time in my life, and I'd much rather do what I'm doing than watch television. That's pretty simple, I guess.

Yeah. [sigh] So, what are you gonna do with the video? I should ask that. What happens with it?

[2:28:14]

PB: Well, one of the things we're going to put them all up on our website once the website is redesigned and built out. Also, there will be a database that is publicly accessible that anybody can access at any time along with transcripts. So, the hope there is that multiple audiences will be able to engage with these interviews. A long form, like a five-hour interview, is kind of dense to engage. So, one of the purposes is for that to maintain historical record so that history is told of this pivotal moment in Detroit, that new voices are included, and it kind of makes it available to the people that will be writing those histories. At the same time, what we're trying to build is a project structure in which we are bringing together community experts including the folks we interviewed, like the mothers as well as folks who have expertise in designing and implementing campaigns using this kind of media, to be working proactively with organizers and organizations and support the work that they're doing.

So, say for instance, if, you know, the Detroit People's Platform is working on, say, a particular CBA [Community Benefits Agreement]. So, if we... Just for example, the Fiat Chrysler one or another one that's coming up. You know, thinking about how we can be using this type of media. Like, we can make short films that can promote political education and popular consciousness and campaign to drive up support for that particular campaign. Other things we've talked about is using these kind of resources for education and curriculum development in K-12, college school. That's something that I work on. Well, I worked on before I came to this work. So, that's close to me. I mean, like other things we've talked about is exhibitions. That could be like a photo exhibition where have, like, say that the [Charles H.] Wright Museum [of African American History] put everyone we've interviewed and put an excerpt from the interview there, the broader idea being that these are the stories that need to be told about the city of Detroit for an increase in popular consciousness and helping to change, encouraging people to think differently about the city and what possibilities there are and raising the question of how do we reach people where they're at and where to make an

impact in the way that they're thinking and the way that they're acting. So, that's my very long-winded way of answering.

RB: I'm not the one to say you're long winded, [laughs] you know that. [laughs] Okay. Well, thank you for what you're doing. I think preserving this historical record is just so important, so important.

PB: Most of the time I know that we get caught up and that's not... Because there's not the immediate return on historical documentation, it's not a priority, and I know like from doing research on social movements, some of the most impactful sources that have shaped my political consciousness and my understanding of history and how movements work is from oral history interviews that were taken during or at least in close proximity to when the organizing was taking place. So, from a personal perspective, I think that's a profound type of material that can be made available to people not 50 years later but in the present moment because there are transformational opportunities to influence people. And, since the media's not covering this stuff.

RB: Oh my God. Yeah, yeah. Thank you all.

[2:32:07]

Herbert Taylor [HT]: No problem. I have a good question for you. It may come off as random, but ever since the last time we spoke with you, all of a sudden I'm starting to understand these billboards, and I see commercials on TV as well or on social media about like 500 million dollars being invested into the water system here in Detroit. I have the understanding that the water authority runs the system. So, how is it that the city of Detroit is pushing that direction?

RB: The... In every municipality, the underground street main system is owned by that municipality. When Detroit ran the whole system, we were like the wholesale provider to the water that we pumped into their system. There would be a point when there was a Detroit water main into, say, a Hazel Park [Michigan] water

main, and there'd be a meter at that point, and, you know, that would be the dividing line between what was locally owned and what was owned by the city. And so, those municipalities are still responsible for maintaining those water mains and rebuilding them and, you know, the valving and the piping, and what they're doing in Detroit is related to those street names in the city, not the large transmission that come out of the plants 'cause those transmission mains are now under the control of the Great Lakes Water Authority even though they're in the city of Detroit. So, that's...that's in short how it is. And, they have some provision in their language that Detroit has to continue to invest in its own system in order to keep ownership of it. That's my understanding.

[2:34:14]

HT: So the--I don't want to say the random 500 million dollars, but do you know where the 500 million dollars came from?

RB: No. They're gonna sell bonds, and Detroiters will be paying it off for 40 years. They're creating, in other words, a huge amount of debt, which was supposed to be the stuff that got us into this trouble, right? But, that's all nonsense because they all create debt, [laughs]and they all fund it in every county, in every city, every state, not to mention the federal trillion dollars, trillions of debt. But, they'll fund it through construction bonds and parcel out the contracts. You know, that's the clean version of it. The shaky side of it is that they're always looking for ways of putting out huge contracts and reap all the side private rewards that go with the contracts, you know. The grateful contractors, you know, get their gratuities to the elected officials and the appointed officials who make the contracts happen, and, you know, I don't know what a reasonable amount...what the reasonable amount is for 500 million dollars worth of work, but I do believe that some of that work has to be done.

Yeah. I heard somebody say yesterday with the... Detroit has wooden water mains. I think that's an old story. [laughs] They found when they built Cobo Hall in 1963, when they dug it out, they found wooden water mains, okay, 'cause the original mains were built of tamarack logs that were bored out of strong wood, and they had iron straps around them to keep them together, and it's always

possible that there's one somewhere that nobody knows about 'cause you can't detect wood with a metal detector, right? [laughs] But, we do have mains, water mains that have been in the ground for over a century, and you can tell from the top side because you can do a hydrant flow test. Get on one block where there's a hydrant and another at the end and see when you turn one hydrant how much the water pressure and the flow drop at the other one and that tells you whether there's been a huge mineral build up or an improper sized main. So, there is a way of determining where the need is. That's valid. But, I think, you know, the procurement process has to be monitored very closely because for that kind of money there's people out there who are going to want to do their dirty deals. Yeah. [laughs]

PB: Thank you.

RB: Sure. Thank you for asking. Uh, you ready?