

**Testimony of Tom Stephens
Regarding Publicly Subsidizing Another Professional Sports Arena in Detroit**

As a taxpayer, resident and homeowner, and on behalf of Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management, I oppose public funding for a new arena.

The issue of public funding for professional sports arenas is not a new one. It has been controversial for decades. It has not worked as an economic development strategy to create high-quality living wage jobs, either in Detroit - where taxpayers funded both Comerica Park and Ford Field during the same years that the city slid into its current fiscal crisis and bankruptcy - or anywhere else.

In the face of this record of proven failure, the suggestion that the majority of funding for a new professional sports arena in bankrupt Detroit should be public tax payer dollars has appropriately been greeted with great public skepticism and even outrage. Desperately needed financial assistance has long been and is still being denied to children mired in poverty, to public safety, transit, education, health, environmental protection, community economic development and other social necessities. Especially under these circumstances, why should elected officials appropriate hundreds of millions of tax dollars to benefit a multibillionaire owner of a sports franchise?

The answer is simple. Because they can. Excessive wealth has generated unjust power. This clear and obvious example of a taxpayer-funded private privilege boondoggle, in a city stricken by all the ills of poverty, blight, crime, and underdevelopment, has been widely recognized as one step too far even for the bloated, unjust plutocratic system of private corporate gain at public expense that we have tragically come to accept as normal.

This context, and the stadium-funding program itself, touch the very essence of the program of emergency management that is fast wiping out any semblance of legitimacy of government in our city and state. Insiders profit at the expense of the public. The poorest and most vulnerable among us receive eviction notices, if that. Enough.

Let the refusal to approve public funding for private gain in the form of this stadium be the beginning of a new era of public investment for community-based economic development, community benefit, human rights and human development, the transformation of neighborhoods and cities into places governed by People, not the rich and their corporations.

Emergency management of Detroit's fiscal crisis is supposed to be about transformation. Public funding for a new sports arena gives the lie to this. As noted, we have tried this before with two massive, publicly funded sports arenas that dominate our downtown. They did not reverse or even slow the descent into bankruptcy. Public funding for a third stadium in the midst of the municipal bankruptcy shows that for all the empty rhetoric about transformational changes, nothing has really changed. It's the same old business as usual for connected insiders who benefit from the public trough, rather than paying taxes for public services by virtue of their immense personal good fortune. If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result, this proposal is insane.

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Austerity for Detroit's People and generous corporate welfare for its sports and other corporate billionaires is the truth behind the lies and rhetoric of emergency management. Elected public officials will approve this wasteful public investment on behalf of private corporate interests that don't need it, because they are beholden to this unjust system and because they are implicitly instructed to do so by our Jones Day corporate overlords. The resulting 'restructuring' in the aftermath of the bankruptcy will lack any legitimacy, and will not allow Detroit to move forward, until we collectively adopt and live by principles, priorities and community-based public investment and development strategies that serve us all as a community, rather than only the cronies and benefactors of elected officials who serve corporate special interests before the community.

The proposed corporate welfare subsidy for a new hockey arena, like so-called 'emergency manager' policies now mis-ruling Detroit, will both fail because they fundamentally misrepresent the real issues and problems in Detroit. Detroit's challenges won't be overcome until we abandon these attempts to base economic 'development' on corporate and political power plays. Instead we have to build up equity, community-based economic development, and democratization of our government and community decision making processes. The whole point of these corporate welfare and 'emergency' government scams is to prevent us from doing what we have to do.

Detroit, like the rest of the planet, faces world-shaking real emergencies in the form of economic and physical violence, climate chaos, energy-related development and ecological failures, poverty, blight, inequality and injustice. If we are serious about (and competent to) begin dealing meaningfully with our real issues and problems, we can begin by refusing to throw money at another millionaire for a professional sports arena. Or not. That is our choice, and your choice as officials elected to represent us.