**Money talks, Detroit silenced**
**Who’s listening to the grassroots?**
**By Diane Bukowski**
DETROIT — Anger and frustration.

That’s the mood of hundreds of bloc club officials, Citizen District Council members, volunteer community groups, regular citizens — many with decades of community service and some just recently organized — they can’t get the ear of the mayor or the city council and they are angry.

The list of money forces lining up to direct city and school budgets and plans include the who’s who of Michigan politics and business. Some, but not all, are familiar: The Skillman Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, New Detroit and Pete Karmanos of Compuware are among many others.

Long-time community leaders say while these billion-dollar foundations have access to the mayor and council, they lack the hard-won resident perspective and legal authority to decide the city’s future.

If he who pays calls the tune, then the foundation influence is understandable. According to a Time magazine report, the $3.1 billion Kresge Foundation is paying Urban Planner Toni Griffin to lead the downsizing of Detroit. She works within city planning department, but is paid from the foundation.

Skillman and Kresge foundations put up $1.85 million to finance Data Driven Detroit (DDD), an agency that mapped the city’s 139-square-miles to aid Griffin’s downsizing.

The Eli Broad Foundation and an additional secret source are paying a portion of state-appointed DPS Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb’s $400,000 plus salary.

The influence extends beyond downtown into the neighborhoods, where the clash between the visions of community groups and foundations play out.

In the neighborhoods, the Skillman Foundation is organizing “community governance boards,” according to an April 28 ad in the Metro Times. The Metro Times ad lists six Neighborhood Governance Boards, part of Skillman’s Good Neighborhoods Initiatives, along with names of board members elected through an unspecified process.

In contrast, Citizen District Councils, many of which are lodging the complaints, are elected by residents of the neighborhood.

The privately backed and created “governance” boards are the Brightmoor Alliance, the Chadsey-Condon Community Organization (CCCO), the Cody-Rouge Community Alliance, the Osborn Neighborhood Alliance, the Southwest Detroit Neighborhoods Congress of Communities and Northend Central Woodward.

Published reports indicate Mayor Bing, City Council President Charles Pugh, Detroit Public Schools EFM Bobb and other city officials have been holding private meetings with foundations to advance “public-private partnerships” that involve city, state and federal grants of public tax dollars.

“These foundations are operating illegally,” said Roy Godwin, a board member of the Virginia Park Citizens District Council. “These groups are supposed to be philanthropists, not involved in politics,” said Godwin. “They are violating federal 501c(3) rules by doing so.”

Non-profits pay no taxes. Numerous published reports indicate many are being investigated by the federal government as well as state governments because they pay huge salaries to their executives, and provide millions of dollars in funding, some of it public, to private contractors not based in the cities they represent.

Bill Hanson, Director of Communication for the Skillman Foundation, said the governance boards are “not subverting anything or anyone.”

“They are voluntary organizations like bloc clubs and neighborhood groups,” Hanson said. Each governance board is established by various methods determined by self-selected members of the communities involved, according to Hanson.

Hanson said the governance boards do not violate Skillman’s 501(c)3 status.

“We don’t participate in partisan politics; we exist to help improve children’s lives in Detroit,” Hanson said.

Hanson said Skillman does meet with Mayor Bing and DPS Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb, citing in particular the Taking Ownership conference held at Skillman’s headquarters in March to establish the Excellent Schools Detroit coalition.

The elected school board has cited that document as one example of Bobb’s insistence, despite state law, on controlling DPS academics. It took an order from Judge Wendy Baxter to get Bobb to meet once with the elected board.

**Mayoral control of DPS**

Now, the petition campaign to put mayoral control of schools on the November ballot is another example of the push to direct the policy and plans of DPS.

A well funded, unnamed group is pushing the measure. Some reports have named Detroit Regional Chamber, New Detroit, Gov. Granholm and Mayor Bing among others as supporters of the initiative. Compuware founder Peter Karmanos — who received the land for his downtown headquarters for $1 under the Archer administration — alone gave $500,000 to push the ballot question, according to news reports.

Both Bing and Granholm attended a recent fundraiser for the group. It was Granholm who appointed Bobb to fix the deficit created by the first state takeover that lasted five years and left the district with nearly $300 million of debt.

Meanwhile Granholm has failed to answer community calls for her to force EFM Bobb to meet with the school board or residents about district plans to close over 40 schools.

The group missed a June 21 deadline to get the initiative on the ballot. City council will decide if the issue will be put to voters.

Bing has said if the measure succeeds he would appoint a CEO and superintendent to run DPS.

In 2004, residents voted down Prop E, led by then-mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, which would have put a mayor in charge of the schools.

Community and union leaders are saying the petition group is using misleading language to get citizens to sign petitions. They have likened it to the techniques that got Prop 2, which ended Affirmative Action in Michigan, on the ballot.

The ballot language reads: “To improve Detroit’s public schools and increase accountability for their quality, do you favor the enactment of legislation authorizing the elected Mayor of the City of Detroit, with the advice of an advisory board comprised of parents, teachers and other community representatives, replacing the school board, to: Appoint and provide oversight to the superintendent, who shall set the curriculum standards and goals for school improvement? Report annually to citizens on the progress of Detroit’s public schools?”

This promise of accountability is already being undercut. Where Title I funds were formerly monitored and managed by DPS, under Bobb some of the millions of dollars involved are directed instead to a private nonprofit, the Detroit Parent Network, directed by Sharlonda Buckman. Not only were 30 school employees cut in the process, but control and accountability have disappeared under another layer of bureaucracy, in this case a private organization.

**Parks, recreation closings**

Marissa Morgan, a Virginia Park CDC board member, participated in a protest June 21 against the closing of the Joseph Walker Williams Community Center.

She said the CDC had not been consulted about plans to close the center.

Under mayoral administrations in the 1960s and ’70s she said, CDCs demanded to play vital roles in any “urban re-development” projects. Members of the Black community then felt that urban renewal projects were actually “Negro removal” programs targeted at their neighborhoods. They campaigned for the renovation of the CDCs, mandated by Michigan’s Blighted Area Rehabilitation Act 344 of 1945 as amended.

Now, under the guise of charitable foundations, forty years later, “urban removal” has again reared its ugly head, CDC members say.

In all of the talk of down-sizing, demolitions, urban agriculture, city and state office holders have ignored the elected CDCs as well as existing bloc clubs, community and school organizations.

Lee Gaddies, Social Justice Chair of the First Unitarian Univeralist Church, said 18 currently constituted CDCs were to hold elections through the Detroit City Clerk’s Office in April. Those CDC’s were Art Center, Ash-Myrtle, Brush Park, Corktown, Downtown, Eight Mile-Wyoming, Elmwood Park III, Forest Park, Hubbard-Richard, Jefferson-Chalmers, Kercheval-McClellan, McDougall-Hunt, Medical Center, Mid-City, University City, Virginia Park, West Jefferson and Woodbridge.

The CDCs are empowered under Article VI of the City Code, which says, “[This article is enacted as] an ordinance to implement the power granted by the state ... by establishing a method for participation and representation by residents of a district area and by persons with a demonstrable and substantial interest in an area where rehabilitation and redevelopment activities are proposed to take place by the public sector.”

“This is deliberate, to make [the CDCs] inactive,” said Joyce Moore, who ran for City Clerk in 2008. “But by law they exist from Coleman Young’s era. They have to be a part of the city’s development plan. Archer unsuccessfully came up with community clusters to replace the CDCs.”

Archer was not successful in abolishing the CDCs, but instead de-funded nearly all of them except a few favored by his administration, including Corktown and Jefferson-Chalmers.”

One of the previous board members of Skillman’s Chadsey-Condon Community Organization (CCCO), Sheila Crowell, said she renounced her role in the group.

Crowell has been active for many years in the neighborhood surrounding the now-closed Chadsey High School and Munger Middle Schools at McGraw and Junction. In an interview, she told The Michigan Citizen that The Friends of Dingeman Playfield, a 15-acre site behind the two schools, worked to re-build the playground for three years, starting in 2006, and applied for $14 million in grant funds to do so.

On Memorial Day weekend, May 29, she said in an E-mail to the Michigan Citizen that she looked out her door after a call from her daughter-in-law.

“I could see two trucks in Dingeman Playfield, digging with all their might,” Crowell said. “The equipment that our youth had was removed as if our youth meant nothing. They had one large set of swings, with three swings left, two poles meant for baby swings with no swings for the little ones, one set of swinging climbing bars, three picnic tables, and three benches. These two trucks and their drivers dug everything out of the ground, leaving nothing for any of our youth to play on.”

A group of residents from the Stahalin community on the city’s Westside appeared at City Council June 22 to seek help in preventing destruction of Hackett playground. The residents have been mowing the grass and maintaining the park. Residents told council they did not know why the playground was targeted for destruction, but they succeeded in stopping a company from removing the equipment. Had they not been there, the playground would be gone. Residents noted there was one acre left to mow and requested help with the mowing.

**Many voices**

The resistance of Detroit residents against the onslaught of anti-democracy forces is echoed by individuals as well as groups.

In an article published on the Detroit Community of Hope Web site, Yusef Shakur, a co-owner of the Urban Network Bookstore on Grand River, blasted plans by Bing and private foundations’ plans to downsize Detroit.

Shakur grew up in the 14th and West Grand Boulevard area and has been an organizer for prisoners’ rights for the last nine years, as an ex-prisoner.

“Dave Bing and his (crime) partner Robert Bobb are nothing but knee-grow puppets that are being manipulated by private and corporate foundations/institutions, such as the Skillman Foundation and Kresge Foundation,” Shakur wrote.

“Recent decisions by Bing to ‘downsize’ Detroit and Robert Bobb to close over 40 more schools in Detroit are both heavily influenced by the Kresge and Skillman Foundations, with the latter playing on both sides of the fence through their Good Schools and Good Neighborhoods initiatives, by openly selecting certain schools and neighborhoods in Detroit that they are hand-picking to invest money in, while openly denying support to other schools and neighborhoods that are deteriorating.”

*Additional reporting by T. Kelly.*