

Tom Walsh: By farm or factory, jobs are needed to grow city

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Logs from trees cut down lay next to abandoned houses in an area near Holcomb and Kolb in Detroit's east-side that has been cleared by Hantz Farms for their urban agriculture project in Detroit named Hantz Woodlands is seen on Wednesday April 16, 2014. / Ryan Garza/Detroit Free Press



By **Tom Walsh**

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Detroit may be America's most intriguing city, its most bewildering and depressing and paradoxically promising city, because it has regressed to not really being much of a city at all.

If this seems an odd premise for a column, blame the Detroit Free Press Michigan Green Leaders Awards for planting the seed.

Blame John Hantz, the multimillionaire money manager and Detroit's would-be Johnny Appleseed.

And blame Jon Gabrielsen, a Michigan native and number-crunching consultant who moved south 15 years ago and now lives in Georgia, but still avidly tracks the fortunes and misfortunes of Detroit.

Both Hantz and Gabrielsen, within a day of each other last week, hit me with the notion that Detroit is no longer a real city in the traditional sense.

It's not dense enough after losing two-thirds of its peak population and most of its industry. And certainly in recent years, Detroit has failed to competently provide its citizens with such basic services as functioning streetlights or adequate police response.

Hantz, at a Detroit Economic Club luncheon Wednesday, was discussing his frustrating five-year campaign to begin large-scale commercial farming on vacant Detroit land, when he tossed out the idea that not every section of the 139-square-mile city needs the same level of city services.

His Hantz Woodlands project, set to kick off May 17 with the planting of 15,000 trees on Detroit's east side, might only need police and fire service — and not the trash pickup and lighting and street-cleaning and snow removal needed elsewhere in town.

Think of the more densely built downtown and Midtown areas of Detroit as a traditional city, Hantz suggested, and the rest as suburb-like "townships" in need of fewer services.

Gabrielsen had e-mailed me his thoughts on what a future Detroit might become when I told him I would be the moderator of a panel discussion at the Economic Club luncheon sponsored by the Free Press, where the Green Leaders awards were presented. Hantz was joined on the panel by Matt Cullen, CEO of Rock Ventures, the non-mortgage group of companies owned by Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert, and by Glenda Price, co-chair of Detroit's Blight Removal Task Force with Gilbert.

Virtually all of the world's very large cities, Gabrielsen wrote, occurred not as a result of some master plan, but from the gradual creation of scattered buildings and businesses and roads that grew together, squeezing out most of the green space between them.

Detroit's depopulation, from a peak of nearly 2 million to 700,000 today, has reversed this expansion process and thus left clusters of small quasi-villages and quasi-towns within its boundaries, separated by large tracts of vacant space or blighted homes and abandoned industrial sites. In that sense, it has regressed into something more like a county than a dense, vibrant city.

The fact that Detroit is bankrupt must certainly be considered as we contemplate what will become of our city that's not really much of a city anymore.

Presumably, redevelopment ideas should give high priority to job-creation potential. Without a major influx of jobs, there is scant hope of repopulation or a growing tax base sufficient to fund long-term growth.

For that reason, Gabrielsen is skeptical that urban farming can do much to help Detroit recover. He cites very compelling data showing manufacturing, railing, warehousing and distribution — just about anything but farming — will create more jobs per acre of land.

He also sniffs at rail transit as a near-term jobs enhancer, saying that flexible rapid-transit buses can move more people to more jobs in more disparate places — for less investment and in far less time — than building out an expensive light-rail project.

Even if Gabrielsen's data is sensible, though, what if nobody wants to put manufacturing plants in Detroit?

And what if rich private-sector investors *do* want to pay for a nifty new rail line similar to ones that have spurred business activity in Portland, Minneapolis and other places?

And what if lots of urban pioneers are willing to plant trees or vegetables on expanses of abandoned land? Isn't that better than nothing?

Intriguing thoughts as Detroit, hopefully, moves soon into its post-bankruptcy future as something of a blank canvas, on the one hand, but also a place that's still home to

hundreds of thousands of real people, many of them desperate for real jobs at livable wages.