

Ex-planner Gilb recalls job with regret, frustration

BY DAVID BARKHOLZ
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In the six years that Corinne Gilb served as director of planning for the city of Detroit, Mayor Coleman Young never asked her opinion on a specific project or development.

Gilb resigned from the post a year ago after spending four years completing a 36-volume master plan for the city — documents, she says, that the mayor probably will ignore.

Looking back, she feels intense regret and frustration that circumstances and what she termed the mayor's heavy-handedness prevented her from accomplishing very much.

Her advice was never requested, and the mayor used the planning department only to confirm his own opinions or to gather details to support his own strategies, Gilb says.

She has returned to Wayne State University as a professor of history and urban studies after a six-year leave of absence.

"I'm not angry. I just feel sadness and regret," Gilb said. "I regret the waste . . . that things aren't being done as well as they could."

During the Young Administration, she says, downtown Detroit has become "a jumbled mess," virtually devoid of grace. A quick glance at the clutter of edifices west of Cobo Hall, marked by the hideous Joe Louis Arena, is enough evidence.



Gilb: I'm not angry.

Worse, Gilb believes that the mayor has taken the city down the wrong path to revival.

Young seems stuck in a by-gone era when big was almost always considered better, the former planning director says.

Gilb says statistics show that small businesses create most of the nation's jobs and that the economy has taken a decided turn toward the service sector.

Given this reality, the city should focus its attention on attracting service and high-tech industries to the area, she says.

But the mayor likes big.

Virtually all of the projects promoted by Young are large in scale and visibility: the Millender Center, the People Mover, the Cobo Hall expansion, General Motors Corp.'s Poletown plant and the renovation of Chrysler Corp.'s Jefferson Avenue plant.

Gilb says a definite psychology underlies the mayor's preference for the behemoth. First, big projects make for big headlines, and the mayor rarely misses an opportunity for media coverage.

At a deeper level, these big projects are a source of personal and civic pride, Gilb says. From the time the mayor took office in 1974, certain power factions in the metropolitan area have waited for his administration to fail, she says.

BACKTALK



Detroit-area native son David Barkholz covers heavy industry, auto suppliers and machine tool makers for Crain's Detroit Business.

From the start, Gilb says, Young has felt constant pressure to prove that he could "bring home the bacon" for the city, and the large developments are perceived as symbols of success.

At the same time, Young's administration and the projects he has helped to attract have created career opportunities for black people that would have been unavailable under a white administration. Those opportunities and the black pride engendered by new developments have been two of the mayor's most significant accomplishments, according to Gilb.

Unfortunately, as the city has concentrated on developing these bigger projects, it has missed opportunities to diversify and attract more growth-oriented industries, she says.

For instance, as early as 1980, Gilb and others were advocating that the city prepare the Woodward corridor from downtown to the New Center area for high-tech businesses. She says the suggestions were ignored and that any chance of attracting high-tech businesses vanished as companies located in Oakland County and elsewhere.

Detroiters, she says, needn't look further than the near bankruptcy of Chrysler a few years back to recognize the danger of relying too heavily on heavy manufacturing for the city's economic well-being.

The question is how to diversify. The key is creating the right business environment for innovative new industries, such as those in the service sector and high tech, Gilb says.

That process needs to start in the schools. She says high schools and universities in the Detroit area continue to prepare students for the secure, bureaucratic jobs of the 1950s and 1960s rather than teaching them problem-solving, entrepreneurial skills.

Equally important, upper- and middle-class black people need to be more willing to support black enterprises with their energies and resources, Gilb says.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that many black people who achieve success do so as employees rather than employers. For example, they tend to be lawyers, physicians or investment brokers.

But Gilb says even though they haven't the wherewithal to employ other blacks, they need to be more willing to offer advice, services or investments. **COB**