Examining Data That Would Downsize Detroit
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This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block.

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And I'm Michele Norris.

Downsizing is a word you hear a lot in these economically troubled times. It usually applies to tight budgets or lost jobs. In Detroit it also now describes a controversial plan from the mayor's office.

Mayor Dave Bing wants to reshape the city by getting rid of buildings that are vacant or in shambles. He also wants to transplant residents who live in neighborhoods that are desolate and dilapidated beyond repair. He says it's too expensive to provide city services in areas that are much like urban deserts.

 Much of the proposal is based on data collected by Kurt Metzger. He's a demographer and the director of Data Driven Detroit, an organization that collects data for the city and for nonprofits. It's also called D3.

Mr. Metzger, welcome to the program.

Mr. KURT METZGER (Director, Data Driven Detroit): Thank you so much. It's great to be on.

NORRIS: You undertook a block-by-block study of Detroit, 139 square miles. What did your study find?

Mr. METZGER: We had surveyors go out and actually collect information in every single parcel in the city of Detroit. And just to give you the real quick analysis, we found better than a third of the land - and that's of 139 square miles - we estimate better than a third of the land in the city of Detroit is either vacant land right now or contains buildings that need to be torn down. It's amazing. I mean, New Orleans is about 70 square miles. We're talking that better than 40 square miles, better than half of New Orleans is vacant land.

Now, of course its interspersed around the city, so that's where the issues about going into neighborhoods where there's a lot of vacant land. But a lot of one or two homes still left on streets. These are neighborhoods that are going to have to be gone into and trying to think about how do we start to move people into other areas.

NORRIS: When you were doing this survey, what did you hear from people who are in the neighborhoods? I imagine that some of the homeowners have been there for a very long time and have watched their beloved neighborhood slowly deteriorate. And they're probably worried about finding themselves now on some sort of relocation hit list. When you were working on the survey, what did you hear from people?

Mr. METZGER: There is a general fear that I'm going to be uplifted and put someplace else. I'm really comfortable in my home regardless of what's happened to the neighborhood. What are you going to do to me?

NORRIS: But they are going to be uplifted...

Mr. METZGER: Well...
NORRIS: ...and moved someplace else.

Mr. METZGER: Yes. Yes. But I think there's a way to work with them and help them to understand that this will be better for them in the long run.

NORRIS: How do you compensate people who have to move? Because as I understand it, they're entitled to 125 percent of taxable value for their property. But their property values have plummeted; have deteriorating along with the surrounding property, so how do you make them whole?

Mr. METZGER: That's a great question and that's one of those questions that I don't know that we have the answer for. I mean, I think we just can't give money and say: Good luck. Go find a place to live.

I think we have to come up with those housing alternatives and work with them both to relocate them into a home that's better - whatever that means. And I think that's something that still has to be worked out. I think we're going to have to really work with individuals, work with the neighborhood groups and other providers in the area and try to really understand how best to move them, keep them whole where they still are more or less with people that they've been around or that they feel comfortable with.

NORRIS: What's the vision or perhaps your vision for a new Detroit once it's downsized - at least the core urban area - and you have these surrounding green spaces or farms? What's the city going to look like? Are you going to wind up with a number of inadvertent Central Parks throughout the city of Detroit?

Mr. METZGER: Well, I envision a city that has very strong neighborhoods. I mean, there are a lot of good strong neighborhoods that we need to reinforce that are connected through parks, through greenways. And, as somebody said, we have probably more open space per person than any other city, that we could actually make this a real quality of life city.

If we start to reinforce the neighborhoods that are good, do some mixed income housing and try to concentrate along basic transportation routes and try to connect communities, and I think we can make this city a really tremendous city going forward.

NORRIS: Well, Mr. Metzger, thank you very much for speaking with us.

Mr. METZGER: My pleasure. Thank you.

NORRIS: Kurt Metzger is a demographer and the director of Data Driven Detroit.