

THE BLAZE

ROCK BOTTOM? DEBT-RIDDEN DETROIT SUBURB LITERALLY RIPS-OUT 1,000 STREETLIGHTS, DARKENS TOWN



In this Nov. 2, 2011, photo Cassandra Cabil stands in shadows cast from her home as she looks out into her street illuminated by house lights in Highland Park, Mich. The 2.2 -square-mile city, unable to pay its \$80,000 per month light bill has worked out a deal with DTE Energy to have the electricity provider turn off and remove nearly a third of Highland Park's overhead street lights. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

HIGHLAND PARK, Mich. (The Blaze/AP) — As the sun dips below the rooftops each evening, parts of this Detroit enclave turn to pitch black, the only illumination coming from a few streetlights at the end of the block or from glowing yellow yard globes.

It wasn't always this way. But when the debt-ridden community could no longer afford its monthly electric bill, elected officials not only turned off 1,000 streetlights. They had them ripped out – bulbs, poles and all. Now nightfall cloaks most neighborhoods in inky darkness.

“How can you darken any city?” asked Victoria Dowdell, standing in the halo of a light in her front yard. “I think that was a disgrace. She said the decision endangers everyone, especially people who have to walk around at night or catch the bus.

Highland Park's decision is one of the nation's most extreme austerity measures, even among the scores of communities that can no longer afford to provide basic services.

Other towns have postponed roadwork, cut back on trash collection and closed libraries, for example. But to people left in the dark night after night, removing streetlights seems more

drastic. And unlike many other cutbacks that can easily be reversed, this one appears to be permanent.

The city is \$58 million in debt and has many more people than jobs, plus dozens of burned-out or vacant houses and buildings. With fewer than 12,000 residents, its population has dwindled to half the level from 20 years ago.

Faced with a \$4 million electric bill that required \$60,000 monthly payments, Mayor Hubert Yopp asked the City Council to consider reducing lighting. Council members reluctantly approved it, even in an election year.

“We knew it was going to hurt,” Councilman Christopher Woodard said. “We’re all hurting.”

In late August, contractors from DTE Energy began rolling through the streets, taking out two-thirds of the light poles.

“It is a winning proposition, but that doesn’t make it a winner with the citizens who find themselves in the dark,” Woodard added. “We had to watch our backs when we got out of our cars before. Now we have to watch them even more closely.”

Unless the government gets an unexpected infusion of cash or sees an uptick in its dying tax base, many parts of Highland Park will remain beneath a shroud every night.

The city’s monthly electric bill has been cut by 80 percent. The amount owed DTE Energy goes back about a decade, but utility executives hesitated to turn off the juice.

“We are extremely concerned with public safety,” said Trevor Lauer, vice president of marketing and renewables for the Detroit-based utility. “We recognize that street lighting is something that contributes to public safety.”

Now, he said, the company has “a municipal lighting customer I’m confident can pay its monthly bill.”

Most of the 500 streetlights still shining in Highland Park are along major streets and on corners in residential areas. DTE Energy has listed the city’s overdue bill as an uncollectable expense.

The leader of a nonprofit group that works to reduce energy costs for low-income families said he’s not heard of any other communities becoming so desperate to save money that they turned off streetlights. It might be a sign of things to come.

“If it works in Highland Park, I could not imagine other cities not looking at that as one option,” said David Fox, executive director of the National Low Income Energy Consortium in Alexandria, Va

In its heyday, Highland Park was one of Michigan’s urban jewels, with large yards, spacious homes and tree-lined streets.

Henry Ford put his first moving assembly line here, and his factory eventually churned out a car every minute. By 1930, the city had grown to 50,000 people.

Ford later moved his primary manufacturing operations to River Rouge, southwest of Detroit, in search of room to expand. Highland Park survived that loss. But it never recovered from Chrysler's decision in the 1990s to move its world headquarters 50 miles north to Oakland County.

"That took away \$6 million" in taxes, Woodard said. "That was a lot of money to not have anymore. It was a major industrial operation moving out of here. When Chrysler moved out, things started to happen."

Small businesses catering to Chrysler workers began to fail, and the city struggled to pay its bills. And like Detroit, which lost 250,000 residents from 2000 to 2010, people moved out, leaving hundreds of abandoned houses.

In 1980, the census counted 27,000 people living in Highland Park. By 2010, that number had fallen to 11,776.

The median household income is \$18,700, compared with \$48,700 statewide. And 42 percent of the city's residents live in poverty.

"It's pretty ghetto," Cassandra Cabil said from her front yard. Voices drift in the darkness from down the street, but the speakers can't be seen.

The 31-year-old short-order cook works odd hours and sometimes makes it home late at night. She watched recently as crews removed the streetlight and pole from in front of her rented home.

"It's really dark unless people have their lights on," she said. "There's a lot of vandalism going on, people breaking into these houses."

RESPONSE:

HIGHLAND PARK NEEDS TO TAKE CARE OF HIGHLAND PARK AND CREATE ITS OWN BUSINESS COMMUNITY

I grew up on the West side of Detroit in Redford Township, really not very far from Highland Park, and this situation in Highland Park really horrifies me. For openers, I will take you back to the movie "Grand Torino" starring Clint Eastwood. The movie takes place in Highland Park, MI. I invite you to take some time to go back and watch it again, because it really illustrates what it is like to exist in Highland Park. As Clint's movie poignantly illustrates, Highland Park is a pretty scary place with the lights on, and I can't imagine the place with the lights off.

How can the state of Michigan allow this to happen? How can America allow this to happen? How can DTE (the power company) allow this to happen to the point of paying laborers to remove the lights and poles, creating what is being referred to as an "irreversible cutback???" As Victoria Dowdell stated, "...that was a disgrace."

This country does have to live within its means. This is a poignant illustration of how we must work together to make that means possible. The article states that Highland Park has never recovered from Chrysler's decision in the 1990's to move its world headquarters 50 miles north to Oakland County. Chrysler's decision should never have been given this amount of power over Highland Park's fate.

This is certainly NOT the Michigan I grew up in. The fact of the matter is, if we as Americans are going to take back our country and preserve our quality of life, it is plain to see that we cannot look to Corporate America to do this, or to large entities like our public utility system. For that matter, we can't look to our government either. America must be allowed to prosper by empowering its people to create their own futures through entrepreneurship and innovation. We need to develop a new generation of entrepreneurs like Henry Ford and Steve Jobs that will allow new business and commerce to flourish, and we need to do this NOW. You don't have to go any further than the Occupy movement to see that we as Americans do not have the luxury of waiting...

Respectfully,

Lynn Sarkany

Founder



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