



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **Kresge not wavering from its commitment to climate resilience and social justice**

June 15, 2017

*Welcoming remarks by Kresge Foundation President Rip Rapson at the Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity Initiative convening at The Gem Theater in Detroit.*

It's such a thrill to see you all in Detroit. Thank you for carving out time to come.

I'm pleased that you had the opportunity to visit some of the work taking place across the city. There's always a temptation to place Detroit in its own self-contained box, concluding that it bears no relationship to other communities across the county.

But I hope the tours you've participated in today suggest otherwise – that the challenges and opportunities we face in Detroit resonate powerfully in other places. Whether reclaiming our waterfront, or reimagining our public spaces and institutions to promote more robust democratic engagement, or repurposing vacant, abandoned and blighted land for green/blue infrastructure, reforestation, or arts and cultural activities, or harnessing the power of community entrepreneurship through a vibrant, decentralized urban food system comprising community gardens, urban farms, locally sourced restaurants and countless other forms of community initiative and ingenuity.

There are any number of threads running through all this effort.

- The affirming power of community residents well-organized where they live.
- The ability of the difficult work of community building to serve as a bridge, building a sense of shared purpose across the normal divides of race, class, and geography.
- The importance of community vision. Just a word about that.

It's easy for a concept like community vision to become trivialized, coated in a perfume of aspirational rhetoric. But the absence of that kind of vision had been utterly debilitating in Detroit. Without it, residents had no rational basis to hope that life for their children would be better. Without it, investors couldn't justify taking deep risks. Without it, a new federal administration that genuinely wanted to help was befuddled about how it could.

Nowhere was this truer than in the city's inability to agree on how to reverse the spread of blighted and abandoned land. Of the city's 380,000 individual land parcels, more than 75,000 are vacant or blighted – a landmass the size of San Francisco.

Not only did the Dresden-like images so favored by national photojournalistic essays make the task of reclamation seem impossible, but the blight created a poisonous concoction of danger, health risks and economic instability that was a scourge on neighborhood life.

And it was compounded by population decline. Detroit's population – once some 2 million residents – had fallen to 700,000 people, distributed over 140 square miles – a mass that could hold San Francisco, Boston and Manhattan, with room left over for St. Paul. There is simply not enough tax base to spread high-quality municipal services equally across that expanse.

The combination of blight and depopulation led Mayor-elect Dave Bing to announce in 2009 his intention to, in effect, shrink the city's footprint by developing a master plan that would concentrate city services in still-healthy neighborhoods. The reaction was scorching – many residents were livid at the thought that they could find themselves in neighborhoods deprived of basic services, or that they might be forced to move.

Realizing that he had stepped on a political third rail, the mayor asked Kresge if we would help. We agreed, provided that robust community engagement become the essential predicate of the planning process.

We then asked one of the nation's foremost urban planners, Toni Griffin, to lead the technical part of the process, assembling a half-dozen teams to assess the city's natural conditions, promising employment hubs, transit patterns, housing conditions, potential areas for blue-green infrastructure or urban farming and the like.

The key was to interweave the two strands, with the technical analyses feeding into the community engagement process, and community perspectives helping determine the questions being asked by the technical teams.

It was a labor-intensive, but highly virtuous, loop. We called on every conceivable method to draw on community experience, values and wisdom – from social media and Internet-based tools to targeted canvassing and door-knocking; from mass phone mobilization to intimate gatherings in people's homes and places of worship. The process eventually actively involved more than 100,000 residents, businesses and other stakeholders.

The result was the Detroit Future City Plan – an investment and decisionmaking framework that has helped guide so much of the activity you saw today.

We had the Detroit Future City experience in our repertoire when we launched the Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity Initiative nearly three years ago. As with Detroit Future City, we hoped to provide a platform by which communities could have the resources to reinforce, elevate and amplify the work they were already doing to more fully internalize resident and community voice into public decision-making.

The initiative crystallized the imperative of unequivocally framing climate change as a social justice issue. But it quickly became clear that that would require new approaches, new partners, new networks of support. That is one of many reasons it is so gratifying to see all of you in this room: You are the embodiment of our aspirations, the evidence that there need be no daylight between environmental stewardship, community voice and social justice.

And your presence here is equally gratifying given our federal political and policy environment.

Earlier this year, our Board of Trustees reviewed our Environment Program's strategy. They had, of course, read the same news accounts we all had of Scott Pruitt's intentions at the EPA or the president's ominous rumblings about the Paris Accord, or any number of other unimaginable horrors. The very real question was whether Kresge's approach to the environment should change dramatically, and fast.

In considerable part because they trusted the extraordinary team – Lois, Shamar, Jessica, Jalonne – our trustees concluded that we had positioned ourselves in exactly the right place. Working with community at the local level, they quickly concluded, was the most powerful antidote to short-sighted, destructive or otherwise misguided federal policy. More specifically, they affirmed a half-dozen principles that have been formative to Lois and her team's thinking:

- The urgency of climate action is undiminished.
- The equity and justice implications of climate change remain profound.
- The international consensus on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions still holds – among cities, corporations, NGOs and nation-states.
- Cities continue to provide strong, bold and – in some cases – visionary leadership.
- Markets are moving inexorably toward renewables.
- Cross-disciplinary, distributive leadership models at the community level hold the power to transform public decision-making about climate change.

So we have stayed the course, and will continue to do so. That doesn't mean that we'll be oblivious to existential threats precipitated by a federal policy apparatus that doesn't understand, or doesn't care about, or is intentionally unequipped to address climate change. Together with legions of other actors in America, we will remain hypervigilant to the deconstruction of policies, practices and attitudes we have spent a generation or more seeking to birth and nurture.

And, in the meantime, we'll use all the tools at our disposal to continue to make progress in transforming the energy and water systems of American cities.

Forgive the cliché, but we desperately need your help. None of the problems we confront is precisely rooted in a singular set of causes. Poverty, economic mobility, climate change, educational attainment or health disparities are not issues to be resolved by lining up hermetically sealed funding streams and solution sets.

Instead, we need strategies that anticipate that these systems ricochet against one another – morphing, recombining, and interbraiding. These strategies will accordingly need to be systemic, not atomistic; dynamic, not rigid; nuanced, not ideological; long-term, not episodic.

Your work recognizes that solutions to our most intractable problems will emerge from this complex interplay of different disciplines. We need you to set the civic tables about issues of climate resilience and urban opportunity; to substitute fresh and animating impulses where stale and uninspiring received practices have fallen short; to lift up and valorize the ability of community residents to have full agency in the decisions that affect their future.

So please continue to lead, to inspire, to challenge. We're counting on you. Thank you – and I hope the rest of your time is fascinating and productive.