

OP-ED from the DETROIT NEWS, June 10, 2021

New charter a roadmap to bankruptcy

BY ALLEN LEWIS AND SHIRLEY V. LIGHTSEY

Not even a decade ago, those of us in Detroit's retiree population watched as our pensions, health care and supplemental support were in severe peril and ultimately reduced during the city of Detroit's chapter 9 bankruptcy. Following the exit from bankruptcy, Detroit has made many great strides to provide city services, while also protecting the reduced pension and benefits for retirees under the plan of adjustment.

Any Detroit resident or retiree who says the bankruptcy situation didn't scare them and didn't impact their life isn't being honest. Now, those of us that retired years ago along with a generation of new retirees face the same threat of fiscal and civic disaster from the revised city charter.

The new charter is a slap in the face to all of the retirees that voted in favor of the plan of adjustment for the rebirth and health of Detroit's present and future. Retirees did vote to have pension and health care reductions, but retirees did so to prevent even deeper and drastic cuts. Now Proposal P disregards those sacrifices and difficult decisions made by retirees, and puts the pensions back in the crosshairs of reduction by leading Detroit back into bankruptcy.

The new charter would cost the city \$3.4 billion over four years, increasing costs for Detroiters while reducing government accountability putting public services such as police, fire and schools at major risk.

Ultimately, the changes would make it impossible to submit a balanced budget and force the city back into bankruptcy. That would put a target on the pensions of retirees and threaten the continuation of city services. We cannot go back. Which is why on behalf of the 4,000 retired city employees of Detroit, we're joining a diverse coalition of community leaders, elected officials and Detroiters in declaring that Proposal P is a problem - for retirees, their families and for all future generations in Detroit.

Retired Detroiters of nearly a decade ago know that our pensions were among the first to be tapped when the city's budget was at stake. Many of us thought we were protected by the state's constitution, but that wasn't the case. If the state's constitution can't protect us, how will the charter? It won't. The city is at risk of this new proposed charter being on the Aug. 3 primary ballot. Proposal P must be rejected to protect not only Detroit's future, but the lives and well-being of our great city's retired population. The days of state control, emergency management and bankruptcy should stay behind us.

The retirees of Detroit can't afford to take this chance.

We see the good intentions of the proposal and commend its noble effort. But a charter should outline and define how a city works, not provide idealistic, unsustainable and unfunded goals for how it could work.

The fate of not only Detroit's retired employees, but the city itself, lies within Proposal P's spot on the ballot. We only hope the city's voters will have the same foresight as we do to reject it.

Allen Lewis is president of the Detroit Retired City Employees Association, and for three years served as a general manager of labor relations for the city of Detroit. Shirley V. Lightsey is the immediate past president of the Detroit Retired City Employees Association, and served the city of Detroit in the Water and Sewerage Department for 30 years prior to her retirement.