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Hollow protests are wasteful – find real ways to effect change



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That a small but energetic number of Detroiters are gathering to protest the appointment of an emergency financial manager in Detroit is understandable. The right to petition government for redress of grievances is guaranteed in the First Amendment, and it's one of the things that makes this nation great.

But there's a profound intellectual disconnect between what the protesters seem to be saying and what they're doing.

Their argument - voiced by City Council members Kwame Kenyatta and JoAnn Watson, and activists like New Black Panther Nation head Malik Shabazz and the Rev. Charles Williams II, who leads the local chapter of the National Action Network - is that we, as Detroiters, can fix our problems by ourselves. Outsiders need not meddle, and certainly shouldn't be swooping in to take the reins.

But their actions so far - blocking traffic with freeway slowdowns on the Lodge and I-94, the threat of a human chain blocking access to the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center - are just about grabbing attention.

I'd have more respect for their efforts if, say, they organized a group of Detroiters to go out and pick up around Belle Isle on a Sunday morning, when the trash piles over the curbs and overwhelms city park staff.

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Or what if they lined the darkened streets of the city's most destitute neighborhoods during early morning hours, when children walking to school wonder what danger lurks in the rows of abandoned houses?

What about getting a group of Detroiters to volunteer to staff the city's recreation centers this summer?

Those are the things we need done here in Detroit, and they're things city government has not been able to do because of the declining population and tax base and sustained, awful decision-making by our elected leaders.

It strikes me that the best way to protest the state's intervention (and to make a strong point about city government's dysfunction, to boot) is to do things that make the need for state help less dire. Show how dedicated Detroiters, working together, can actually make things better. Take control of the city's trajectory. Make a difference.

A protest that slows traffic? That just shows disrespect for metro Detroiters commuting to work, people paying what little taxes the city still has the ability to collect. Not to mention that if an ambulance gets stuck behind the wall of slow-moving cars, the protest could turn destructively embarrassing.

A human chain around city hall? It's a bit inane and focused on the idea of power, rather than results.

This is more than a nitpicking criticism, too.

Demagoguing, or playing on people's worst instincts and fears for one's own political gain, has long been a problem here in Detroit, and its prevalence among leadership has helped lead the city to this low point.

The protests over the emergency financial manager in Detroit appeal to the most base and craven instincts, seeking to tell a people who can't count on the most basic services that their biggest problem is the outsiders who are tasked with restoring order.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s was successful precisely because it avoided that kind of indulgence. Demonstrations were effective because they focused attention on the problems that needed changing, not just on the people staging them.

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In Detroit, our problem is the lack of services and the fiscal imbalance that make it impossible to manage a sustainable urban center. Trash. Darkness that helps make streets horribly dangerous.

I'd love to see a series of protests that drew attention, especially right now, to those issues and the solutions that Detroiters themselves could help effect.

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