IT’S NOT ABOUT DETROIT’S BUDGET …

It’s about

Detroiters’ lives

City leaders have forgotten what really matters

In January, a 6-year-old boy died in a southwest Detroit house fire because the city’s depleted ambulance corps could not get to him in time.

The same month, an 85-year-old woman's home burned to the ground because it took firefighters 21 minutes to respond, their trucks rumbling past closed stations closer to the fire.

This is Detroit. This is life for Detroiters.

And this is the breach unto which Gov. Rick Snyder will now dispatch an emergency financial manager, a last-ditch effort to seal the gap between the promise of functional city government and the reality of a citizenry that suffers - and dies - from the utter collapse of basic service delivery.

Detroit's elected leaders have been unable, and in many cases unwilling, to confront the horrible fiscal imbalances that leave insufficient money for EMS rigs, fire trucks, police officers and public lighting.

Now they'll lose power to someone who will.

The governor's announcement last week stirred an instant debate about the "importance" of local governance, and the cost to elected officials' authority.
City Council members say they may sue to block the appointment of the emergency financial manager, principally because they're worried about whether the manager might cut them too far out of decision-making.

But I'm reminded of the council's decision, just a few weeks ago, to forgo a plan to make Belle Isle into a state park, which was part of the fiscal stability plan a majority of the council signed onto last year.

Members dickered over control and concerns about the state's "intentions." And several complained that the debate over Belle Isle had become a big deal; it would save the city only about $6 million a year, members said.

But $6 million could buy a lot of new EMS rigs, or pay to keep far more on the road than Detroit has now. And $6 million could pay for at least 60 new police officers or firefighters. It could have meant better staffing and maintenance at dozens of other rundown parks across the city.

Detroit's elected leaders have just lost perspective about what matters, and what's significant about their jobs and people's lives in this city.

The emergency financial manager is coming to repair the covenant between government and the governed, to return the focus of the city's infrastructure to its most basic responsibilities. Keep the streets safe. Pick up the trash. Run the buses on time. Fight the fires and rescue the wounded.

That's what the council and the mayor have failed to do, consistently. Instead, they've allowed debt, liabilities and a morass of egos and dysfunction to overtake nearly everything else.

I'd love to believe that with one more chance, one more agreement, the city's political class could get its act together and start digging Detroit out of its financial hole, rather than continuing to dig deeper.

I'd also like to believe in unicorns and gold pots at the end of rainbows, though.

An emergency financial manager, someone with near unfettered authority to make change and set finances right, is a more realistic bet right now. Snyder has to be sure, of course, that he picks the right man or woman for the job, and that the standard for performance is a high one.

The fix that matters is not ultimately about fiscal balance - it's about the people who live here, and improving their lives.
At minimum, let's say people in the city shouldn't be dying, waiting for services that never come.

The governor says Detroit can't wait.

I say it's Detroiter, the victims of the spectacular failure of local governance in this city, who can't afford any more delay.

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