
Interview: LaMar Lemmons, III

Detroit: a Deserted Hub Of a Non-Producing Nation

LaMar Lemmons, III is a former Michigan Democratic state representative whose district was in Detroit. He was interviewed on March 12 by Marcia Merry Baker and Richard Freeman.

EIR: LaMar, you grew up in Detroit, and your life spans exactly the time from when “things worked,” as compared with today, where Detroit represents the overall breakdown crisis in the United States. It was a manufacturing city, a cultural center and so forth, and now people are fleeing. Let’s take this section-by-section, and begin with jobs. The National Conference of Mayors’ studies report that Detroit has had one of the highest rates of loss of manufacturing jobs in the nation. How does the 1960s compare with today?

Lemmons: Let me say this. When I came out of high school, people would go from one factory to another. They could leave one factory if they didn’t like it—the foreman, or the task they were assigned—they could just go to another factory. Jobs were plentiful.

The community—there was a solid housing stock. The majority of people were working. Everybody was working. There was a solid family base. The schools were much better than they are now. They weren’t as good as some of the other schools in the suburbs, in the white communities—that’s always been the case in America—but they were much better than they are today.

EIR: And transportation and health care, the same?

Lemmons: And the same thing in transportation and health care. Even the bus system worked much better than it does now. You could get a bus, and then 10 minutes later, there would be another bus.

There were factories—

EIR: What were some of those?

Lemmons: Chrysler, Dodge Main, the Cadillac plant, the Buick plant—factories abounded throughout the city. Many of those plants have now shut down.

The housing stock has deteriorated. You see what we call snaggle-tooth housing—that is that, you see a house, and then there are several vacant lots where homes used to be, and then there’s a house. It used to be, the homes were aligned—beautiful, aligned homes. It was a totally different community.

There were businesses throughout the community. People could also work in small mom-and-pop stores. This was in the ’60s and the early ’70s.

EIR: During the last few years, Detroit went from about 1.6 million people to about 940,000 people, from between 1960 and then 2000-02. Detroit lost 43% of the population. What has that been like?

Lemmons: We lost that population. We lost the tax base. It has devastated the city. Crime has risen as a result. In my area, we had the highest youth population in the United States, with very little recreational outlet. So you have children—young people, teenagers, etc.—and no recreational outlets, and overcrowding in the schools. My wife is a school teacher and she has 30 kids in a class in the first grade. It’s not a good life.

EIR: What is your district?

Lemmons: The East Side of Detroit. I am on the far East Side of Detroit. The urban blight was expanding, and so it’s now moved all the way to the farther eastern rim, that used to be a white area when I was a kid. And now it’s a black area, because all the whites have left. The city is really probably the largest black-populated city in the United States.

EIR: So the shift took place over 40 years?

Lemmons: So now it’s a black, poor city with a large senior population, and a large youth population, with the working poor. So it went from a middle-class working town to a working-poor town, and a non-working town.

EIR: In terms of housing, some sections of the city, if you go eastward from Woodward Avenue on the east side, have not even been fixed up since ’67 and ’68. They’ve just been left like they were during the riots. From downtown, if you go about a mile and a half—we just drove through—there were homes, which had trees in the front, that reached up to the second story, not normal trees out in the lawn. The trees were literally in front of the house, which means that no one had moved into the house for 20-30 years, because trees could only get that high after a while. There were sections of Detroit that have not been rebuilt.

Lemmons: There are large sections of Detroit that have not been rebuilt. And on the East Side in particular, there are large sections. In fact, in some of my sardonic humor, I drive through the neighborhood singing, Mr. Rogers’ “It’s a Wonderful Day in the Neighborhood,” because the blight is so depressing, with the trash and the blighted homes, and people actually living in those conditions that are reminiscent of Soweto, or a Third World country.

EIR: Have they talked about so-called urban renewal?

Lemmons: We have always been talking about that, for my entire life. They talk about what they are going to do. But very little has been done.



Three things that Detroit used to have, but has no more: skilled jobs for high school graduates; transportation; and people. The city's population is just over half what it was 40 years ago; with no metro or light rail, "you can't get anywhere without a car"; and Ford Rouge, closed like so many other plants, has now been reopened on a small scale.

EIR: You were saying, that it's tremendously expensive to live in Detroit.

Lemmons: Right. Insurance, and other things.

Mine is more of a middle-class home, so—but even with lesser homes, a \$200,000 home in the city of Detroit, you can easily pay \$4,000 a year in homeowners' insurance.

Auto insurance is astronomical. My daughter is in her early 20s, and has to pay something like \$3,000 a year for auto insurance, on a very modest vehicle—a mid-priced vehicle.

It's very expensive to live in Detroit, and of course, the people in the middle class that decide to stay, then they send their kids to private schools, because the public schools are overcrowded and crime-ridden. The buildings are deteriorating in most cases, and overcrowded. Even when they build brand-new buildings, they are overcrowded, which of course, tears the building up and accelerates the deterioration of the building.

EIR: So for education, this means either religious denomination, or so-called charter schools—

Lemmons: People find private schools. One of my best friends sends his kids to school in Grosse Point, and he pays \$15,000 a year, for two kids—and that's half the regular tuition. That's University of Liggett in Grosse Point.

And then, I have another friend, and she sends her kids to a parochial school, to a Catholic school. She's not Catholic,

but the school is better. It's a step up, because at least you have a much better student-to-teacher ratio.

EIR: What has happened to the schools, over the past 20-25 years?

Lemmons: A lot of things have happened. The school system—I don't know where to begin on the school system, except to say that first of all, the biggest problem was overcrowding. And then, the family, and the problems that they have—the deterioration of the family.

Let me say this too. Most families, in the '60s—African-American families, most people that I knew, came from two-parent households. And now you have the phenomenon of the single black woman raising her children, and still working and holding a full-time job. Because men don't have jobs, so they don't get married. They don't get married, but they still have the relationships in the human fashion, and so, I would say that 70-80% of the children in schools come from single-parent

households, with a female-headed household. And that's another big shift.

And of course also, when they are working—particularly with adolescent boys, and with a city without recreation. So you have no recreation, you have single, female-headed households with adolescent and teen-age boys with nothing to do, and so this is a recipe for disaster. So you have high crime.

EIR: So, let's say you get out of high school. You are a young male. Where do you go?

Lemmons: There are two things. When you get out of high school, you are lucky if you really have a sixth or seventh grade education, in reality. But if you are one of the lucky ones, who went to one of the better schools, or managed to educate yourself, or get an education, and you go to college; then most likely you don't return to Detroit. And it used to be the place to come to, for the middle class to come and work.

EIR: So now, unlike 40 or 50 years ago, where you came into Detroit—in fact it was a drawing card from the South and from throughout the Midwest—instead, you are leaving, either going out into the counties, or out of the state.

Lemmons: You either go out into the suburbs, or out of the state, if you are middle-class. Because for one thing, you can't afford to live in Detroit, with the insurance rates the way they are, the crime, the schools, and poor housing stock—older



Production jobs gone, engineering jobs going. . . . The Ford Engineering Center in Dearborn, Michigan was being demolished in March. Detroit's ambitious and well-educated school graduates, Representative Lemmons says, leave the city. Historical reverse-migration to the South is under way.

housing stock and not enough new housing being built, and poor city services because of the lack of money. All those things. So our population is at 900,000 and something, and dropping rapidly.

EIR: The hospital situation? In your district?

Lemmons: They've closed three hospitals within the last three years: Samaritan Hospital, Holy Cross Hospital, and Saratoga Hospital. They were all on the East Side, within a five-mile radius from each other within my district.

EIR: And they had all services?

Lemmons: They had the full gamut of services. But most of the people the hospitals cared for, had like, 80-90% Medicaid or Medicare reimbursement. And, according to the doctors, they were only getting something like 20¢ on the dollar, in terms of what they were actually billing.

And so they didn't have any other patients like the suburban hospitals that have regular-paying, insured patients to offset their percentage of Medicaid patients, where these hospitals were 80-90% Medicaid.

EIR: And this must have gone really wild after the 1997 so-called Balanced Budget Act, which decreed that hospitals were going to get less Federal reimbursements.

Lemmons: Exactly. When the government decided they were going to pay less, that is exactly what happened over the time period. I went to one hospital that looked like a MASH unit. People were all out in the halls. They didn't have enough rooms. This hospital happened to be on the West Side.

EIR: There was an offsetting of people who needed care, ending up in the hallways of the hospitals remaining open?

Lemmons: Exactly. They flooded in. They had to go somewhere.

EIR: How many hospitals are left?

Lemmons: There is one hospital in my district, and about 12 in the city. In my district, it's St. John's, and it's peripheral. In fact, part of the hospital is in Grosse Point, and part is in Detroit. That's how far it is. The hospital is literally built on the border line.

EIR: How many people are in your district, roughly?

Lemmons: 100,000.

EIR: So they have one hospital for 100,000 people?

Lemmons: Well, they have one hospital for probably, 400,000, because the district is surrounded—I'm not even counting the Grosse Point population, but just in that area. This happens to be in my district, but the adjacent areas are served by the same hospital.

EIR: And this has presented itself as a so-called "Detroit city" medical problem for the state. Governor [Jennifer] Granholm has said, "Well, we'll give you \$50 million, and you"—

Lemmons: Governor Granholm came in with \$50 million to save the DMC [Detroit Medical Care—an urban hospital system], because they were about to close Detroit Receiving Hospital, which would be the equivalent of D.C. General—like Detroit General Hospital. And so, thank goodness, that we do have a Democrat in, because [Republican former governor John] Engler would have let it close down.

EIR: And this is Detroit Medical Center. Traditionally, the biggest?

Lemmons: That's a group of about five or six hospitals in the central part of the city.

EIR: What about the health condition of people, the children? Only a third—or less of the population has health insurance than you would find elsewhere?

Lemmons: I would say that most people in the inner city, many of them don't have health insurance at all. And others have Medicaid as insurance, for the poor.

Even the working poor, the people making \$8 and \$10 an hour, they are doing so without health insurance. So they are uninsured. So the people that are insured—a large part of the population are insured through Medicaid, through being



St. John's Hospital is the only one remaining in Representative Lemmons' Detroit/Grosse Pointe district; and it was only saved from closing by community demonstrations like this one, on July 31, 2003.

mothers with children, and that's the only way that they are insured.

EIR: The infant mortality rate, twice as high?

Lemmons: The infant mortality rate is high, and the lead paint consumption is extremely high. It's a big issue in my district, that I was informing people about. Because, there were older homes done, definitely before the 1970s, and many of them were done in the forties.

EIR: And then you have all the conditions, like diabetes management and so forth, that you don't have the care for.

Lemmons: Exactly, and remember, it's an old industrial town, and therefore there hasn't been proper remediation and environmental clean-up of those areas. So the contaminants from either lead, or other contaminants from these old brown fields, that people are living on top of. Because this was the industrial belt. And they just left without cleaning up, without any type of remediation, and so it's really a very toxic place as well.

EIR: And one of the national statistics shows that the rate of pedestrian deaths from autos, and other deaths from demoralization, is high. . . . What happened with the transportation system?

Lemmons: Many of us in Detroit believe that the auto industry has deliberately kept us from having a mass transit system. There's no mass transit system in the city of Detroit. There's a bus system that has been declining in the amount of buses,

the routes, and the frequency. So there's really no mass transit. You almost have to have a car.

But remember, we talked about how expensive the auto insurance is. You know, a typical person pays \$2,000 and \$3,000 a year for auto insurance. So then, what happens is that it has created an illegal cottage industry, of phony insurance, and what we call, "insurance tabs." Because, Michigan mandates that you have the insurance, which is identified by the sticker on your plate. So now, there is theft of stickers. There is a cottage industry of creation of phony stickers, so that people can drive and get around.

EIR: Was there ever a fight to build a mass transit system? Were people talking about light trains?

Lemmons: You've got to realize, in a city like Detroit, what you have is a Soweto-like ghetto. And so a lot of people: The argument is, whether we want "those folks"—being the African-Americans in the inner-city—to come out here and work in the suburbs or not. Because there is no way to get to the few jobs that are being created, and they are very low wage-paying jobs—there's no way to get the workers to the jobs, because there's no mass transit.

EIR: Which raises the question, because I know, in 1996 they passed the welfare reform. What we said at the time, was: This is taking welfare mothers, putting them into jobs that maybe others would have been working, paying them minimum wage or below. The question is, how did they get anywhere?



The Greektown casino, one of three large casinos that have been built in hollowed-out Detroit, along with new sports stadia. "Let me tell you," Lemmons says, "the gambling has also been a problem."

Lemmons: Actually, what they have done is, that they have a workfare program, and they try to find these mothers jobs, and what they've done is to take the child away from the mother, and put them in a childcare system, so it hasn't saved the state any money. Because they pay for them to be in the childcare system. And the mother works, goes off and stays away from the child, going long distances to work, for close to minimum wage. And then they subsidize her with the health insurance, or whatever, for a time period.

EIR: So, if they can't even get a bus—you said, they used to be every 10 minutes—but now—

Lemmons: Well, it's also again, with privatization, they've allowed certain companies to create transportation systems, just to drive them. So they're not saving any money. Between the childcare, and the transportation, and the other supplemental things—it costs as much, or more, to put the mother to work. Just to say that she is working.

EIR: What about how people, in order to keep some kind of job, wherever they may be living, they end up having to drive long distances, such as way out in the county?

Lemmons: Many of them are driving long distances, or trying to arrange with transportation services. There are independent, privatized transportation services—particularly, again, to take the working poor out to suburban areas.

To keep a job, they could easily spend a couple hours a day, two or three hours a day. Fifteen hours a week.

The metropolitan area has about 4.5 million people, so they travel throughout that metropolitan area. In fact, the people, such as some of the school teachers that work with my wife: One of them lives out in Ann Arbor, so she makes an hour commute every day to go to work. So it also works in

reverse, if they do work in the inner city, or teach in the inner city schools.

There's a glut of teachers, but there is a shortage in the inner city. So those people who do decide to brave the challenge and teach in the inner city, with 30 kids in the classroom, they come from elsewhere.

EIR: And you had, in the meantime, the approval of gambling in different forms, and other kinds of so-called entertainment, mass entertainment.

Lemmons: Let me tell you, the gambling has also been a problem.

I was the founder of the Outer Drive Homeowners Association, where I live, where we try to maintain the homes, and fight the blight in the inner cities. And many people have been losing their homes, just since the casinos. Because they go get their second mortgages. We're being inundated with these mortgage sales, to take out mortgages on their homes. There is not a month that has gone by that someone hasn't called me to ask for help, to find them a way to relocate, because they lost their homes.

And when they take the homes, they leave them as empty hulls, particularly on our street, because they're larger middle-class homes, and they're solidly-built brick homes, but they become eyesores. Because they don't sell them, because it's not like there's a large group of middle-class black folks who want to move into the area. And so, you have a nice brick home, and it becomes an eyesore, because those people who had been there, have just lost it.

And frequently, in many cases, these are the elderly. You would be surprised how many older people go down to the casino and lose large sums of money, and have lost their homes. Or have a relative who lost their home.

In one case I know of, a mother let her son take her—she loaned her son money to constantly get him out of debt. People are committing suicide.

We have three casinos. We have MGM Grand. We have the Greektown casino, which is owned actually by the Indians; it was, initially. And we have one more, Motor City Casino.

EIR: When did the casinos come in?

Lemmons: Two or three years ago. Dennis Archer was the Mayor. Maybe in 1994; maybe it's almost ten years now.

EIR: You have said, that there is now a process where many people are moving back to the South. That people used to move into Detroit in the '60s and the '70s from Alabama, Georgia and so forth, but now it is reversing.

Lemmons: Right. In fact, our Mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, debated whether he was coming back to Detroit, when he graduated from college. Many of the professional class, I think I mentioned that—many people who are successful and get a marketable skill—they leave the city of Detroit.