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>FOREFRONT

FLINT'S MAN IN WASHINGTON

The Fight for Legacy Cities Moves to Capitol Hill



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Flint, Mich. in mid-summer is one of the lushest cities in America. It's not just the variety of verdure growing in the damp Great Lakes climate — oaks and elms in the sky, yarrow, chicory and goldenrod on the ground — but all the spaces that greenery has to fill. Grass grows along lightning patterns in cracked sidewalks. Weeds rise to full tide in empty lots.

Dan Kildee, Flint's freshman congressman, hasn't visited his grandmother's old house in nearly a year, since he first campaigned for his job. Then, the roof had been staved in by a fallen cottonwood. Now, the house has disappeared, another casualty of the arsonists who entertain themselves by thrill-burning vacant dwellings. On arson calls, Flint's understaffed fire department only tries to prevent flames from spreading to the neighbors. If they douse them, the firebugs will return to finish the job. All up and down Jane Avenue, empty spaces outnumber slumping Craftsman houses.

Kildee mounts a charred porch step and aims his smartphone camera at the foundation, now a trash dump whose most prominent discard is a rubber tire. A feral white cat stalks among the blackened timbers.

"This looks rural," the burly, balding congressman mutters, before indulging in every Flintoid's favorite emotion: nostalgia. "I remember as a kid this being a vibrant neighborhood, and an interesting neighborhood. It was anchored by St. Mary's Church."

When Kildee began his own political career, as a "long-haired" 18-year-old Flint Board of Education member in 1977, the block was still "intact," with a house on every lot and a GM car in every driveway. Still, he didn't quite break the record for youngest elected official in the nation. That title belonged to Michael Moore, who a few years earlier had been elected to the school board in Flint suburb of Davison, also as a shaggy 18-year-old. The two moved in the same progressive circles, and Kildee contributed to Moore's alternative newspaper, the *Flint Voice*.

But by the time the two men cut their hair and began making names for themselves, the Flint they'd grown up in was gone. Assembly line automation, Japanese competition and General Motors' impatience with labor militancy — this is the city where United Auto Workers was founded during a violent strike — have reduced automaking jobs from 80,000 to 6,000

today. Buick City, an industrial complex built to rival Japanese production methods, closed in 1999 and was razed to a concrete slab last year. Chevy in the Hole, a fabled plant where the famous **General Motors Sit-Down Strike** took place, went down in 2004.

Kildee has been an elected official for all but 2.5 years of his voting life. His political career is a coeval of his hometown's decline, devoted to managing the emptying out of Flint and other Rust Belt cities, so blight and crime don't destroy the quality of life for residents too poor or stubborn to escape. As treasurer of Genesee County, he founded the nation's first community land bank. Designed to take vacant buildings out of the hands of real estate speculators and put them under the control of local government, the Genesee County Land Bank has been copied by dozens of communities with more land than people to live on it.

It was that policy success that helped pave his path to Washington, where Kildee has become a champion not only for his hometown and home state, but for all the nation's "legacy" cities, as he calls Midwestern and Northeastern metropolises struggling to adapt to a post-industrial century.

"It's invaluable to have somebody inside the Beltway who understands what's happening on the ground," said Jim Rokakis, a former treasurer for Cuyahoga County, Ohio, who adopted Kildee's land bank concept to deal with the foreclosure crisis that hit Cleveland earlier, and harder, than the rest of the nation. "Somebody who has served at the local level as county treasurer. We both very, very closely watched this foreclosure crisis. Dan got it, and that's why he responded with this idea that's going to be his legacy. He's the father of the land bank movement."

As a congressman, Kildee pestered Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke on how the Fed could help cities facing bankruptcy — months before Detroit found itself in that very situation. He brought home millions of dollars to tear down abandoned houses in Michigan. And he was the first congressman to address the Detroit bankruptcy on the House floor, citing it as "a call to action to have a much bigger discussion about how we support and fund our cities."

"Dan really cares about these older industrial cities," said Alan Mallach, a Brookings Institution fellow who began working with Kildee in Flint and

continues to do so in Washington. “There aren’t too many members of Congress who do. He’s an extremely articulate voice for older cities.”

In late July, Detroit’s bankruptcy was the finance story of the week. “The consequences for the failure of a whole set of great American cities is not limited to the people who live in those places,” Kildee, the city’s most outspoken defender in Washington, [told Bloomberg News at the time](#). He got the attention because he’s taken on a cause few other congressmen associated themselves with.

But how that translates to D.C.’s halls of power is still unknown. Back in Michigan, Kildee was one of the most innovative public officials in the nation. Can he now convince Washington that America’s struggling cities are worth saving?

they foreclosed. As long as the land was worth more than its delinquent taxes, the speculators could profit.

The system of selling liens to third parties was a 19th-century creation, designed to allow government to get cash quickly, without waiting for overdue tax payments. For pre-postindustrial Flint, liens were a disaster, putting houses in the possession of absentee owners who let them go to seed. If the bottom feeders couldn’t collect taxes or sell at a profit after foreclosing, they sometimes stopped paying taxes themselves, and the property ended up cycling through the lien system again, a process that could take seven years.

Kildee was out jogging one night when he had a revelation: The lien system privatized the profit on high-value property, while socializing the losses on junk houses no investor would touch. Why not take control of *all* the vacant land, so that profits from

“We both very, very closely watched this foreclosure crisis. Dan got it, and that’s why he responded with this idea that’s going to be his legacy. He’s the father of the land bank movement.”

A WINDING PATH TO THE CAPITAL

In 1984, a few years after General Motors began its withdrawal from Flint, Kildee was elected to the Genesee County Board of Commissioners. During each biennial campaign, he found himself knocking on fewer and fewer doors in his southwest Flint district.

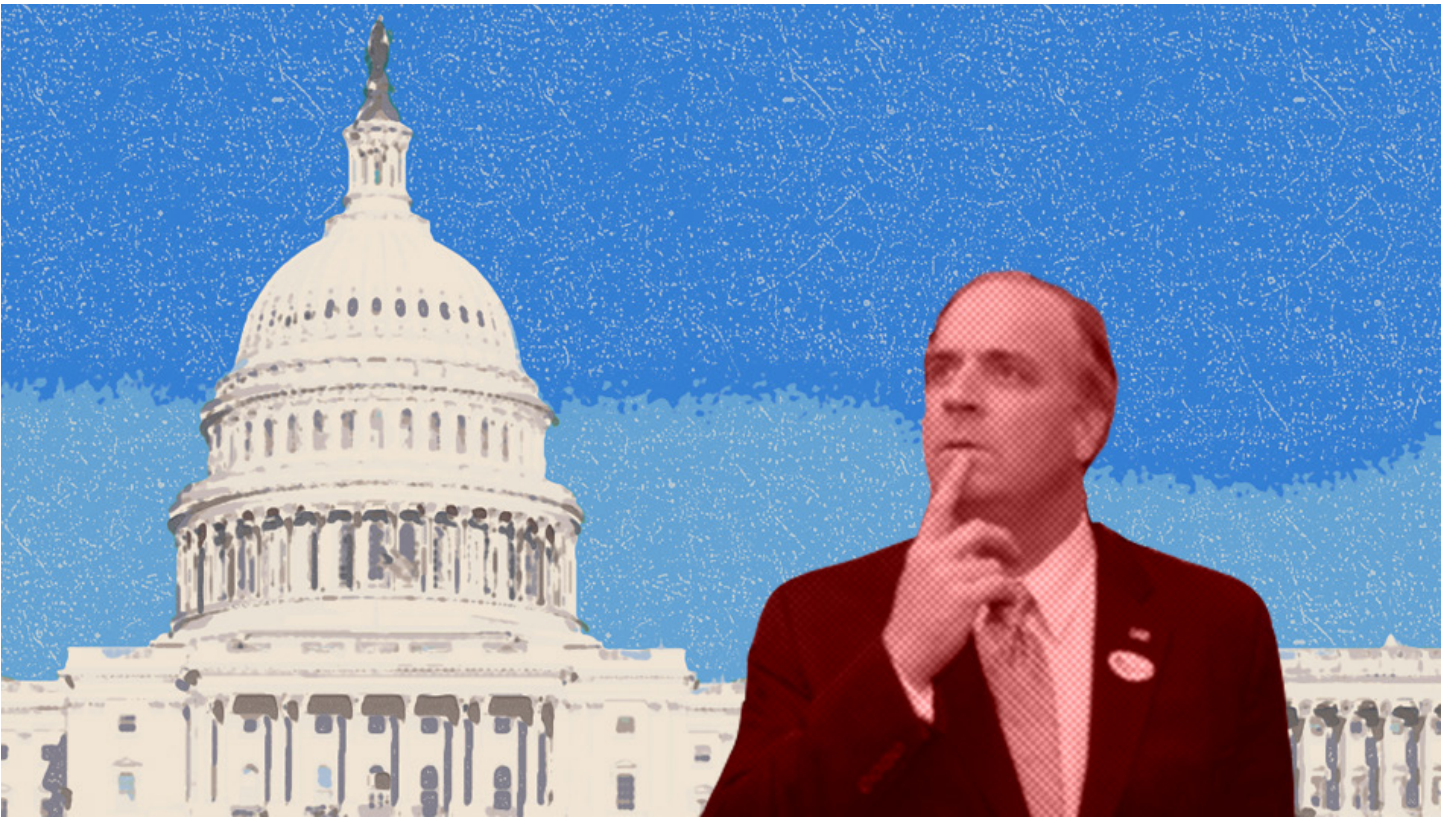
“In one section of my district, there were empty houses where I’d talked to voters two years before,” he recalled in a recent interview. “It didn’t really occur to me that this was part of some larger phenomenon, but it was just obvious to me that there was some sort of decline and abandonment taking place.”

Elected county treasurer in 1996, Kildee quickly discovered that his hometown was a major market for tax lien speculators. These “bottom feeders,” as Kildee called them, bought liens on abandoned property in bulk. If the owners paid, the speculators made a 15 percent return. If the owners didn’t pay,

valuable suburban properties could pay for repair and upkeep on near-worthless houses in Flint?

The treasurer’s office could stop the speculation by borrowing money equal to all the delinquent taxes in Genesee County and paying local governments what they were owed. In this way, the county would become the tax speculator and the landlord, renting out salvageable houses. That might have sounded radical in many communities, but coming from a politician who came of age in the union-dominated Flint of the 1970s and ’80s, the idea was palatable enough to move forward.

In 1999, the idealistic treasurer went to Lansing and convinced the state legislature to change the tax law, eliminating lien sales and instead allowing counties to foreclose on delinquent properties. The seemingly arcane change in tax law represented a major change in the way the city dealt with real estate. The quiet maneuver would lead, five years later, to



groundbreaking legislation that enabled the creation of the **Genesee County Land Bank**.

Simply defined, a land bank is a public body with the power to issue bonds, collect rents and trade in property. It is also deeded foreclosed properties not sold at auction or claimed by a municipality. (In Flint, almost all foreclosures end up in the Land Bank, although a small number sell each year through auctions.)

The Land Bank is now the largest landowner in Genesee County, with 9,000 properties. It has demolished 3,000 houses and refurbished 148 in viable neighborhoods. In 2005, it became a developer. With \$200,000 from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which sprinkles legacy auto industry money throughout Flint, it purchased the Durant Hotel from a speculator in Asheville, N.C. Named for GM founder William Crapo Durant, the hotel had been *the* place to stay for traveling salesmen doing business with the company, and its ballroom *the* location for Flint's high society parties. The Durant closed in 1973. By the time the Land Bank got a hold of it, the hotel was a decaying mess, so cluttered with garbage it looked, Kildee said, "like the Titanic underwater."

He was not deterred. The Durant was a

key to Kildee's ambition to rebuild Flint "from the center out."

"The Durant for me was really important, because it was not only the biggest empty building in downtown Flint, but it sat at the northern terminus of downtown, looking back at us, eight stories," he said. "It was this constant reminder that we are not the city we used to be. It had real potential as a building, great bones. But the psychological and external effect of the Durant was greater than the building as a development project itself, because it said to the community, 'You know, everything that failed doesn't have to be a continuing failure.'"

The Durant is now a **luxury apartment building**, its chessboard ballroom floor restored to gleaming glory. It's just blocks from the University of Michigan-Flint campus, and one-bedrooms with granite countertops start at \$665 a month. It has been a key to downtown Flint's revival, which has traveled through the small central district. Saginaw Street, downtown's main drag, was a midway of failure 20 years ago, with a plywood-to-glass window ratio of one to one.

Since then, the wrought-iron "Vehicle City" arches have been restored. There's a tapas restaurant,

a hipster t-shirt store and a men's clothing emporium. Most significantly, the University of Michigan-Flint, once a four-year community college, is a residential campus anchored by a dormitory in the old Hyatt Regency, a trashed relic (along with Auto World) of Flint's failed campaign to reinvent itself in the early 1980s. Some give Kildee the credit.

"If it weren't for Dan Kildee, I wouldn't have a job," said Richard Coulter, a maintenance engineer at the Durant. "He's the one that got this whole thing started. A lot of people wanted to tear this building down, but he had a vision... All of this stuff you see downtown wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for this building."

Neal Hegarty, the Mott Foundation's vice president of programs, echoed Coulter. In addition to supporting the Durant, Mott provided \$891,000 in start-up costs for the Land Bank. It was eager to help, because Kildee wasn't just proposing a one-time fix to Flint's abandonment problem.

"The thing that was compelling to us was that he had an idea for something that would be sustainable," Hegarty said. "It was an elegant model for a public-private partnership. The notion of doing things more regionally really appealed to us, too. Here we had a countywide elected official saying this is a countywide solution."

But not everyone in Flint feels so warmly toward Kildee or the Land Bank. In 2010, he resigned as treasurer to found the Center for Community Progress, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit that advises shrinking cities on how to manage blight and vacancy. The campaign to replace him was a referendum on his creation. The Republican candidate, Judy Zabik, **called the Land Bank** "the biggest slumlord in Genesee County." (Don Williamson, a former Flint mayor who resigned a step ahead of a recall election, once used the same term.)

"The government was never intended to become a Realtor," Zabik said. "The housing market is such that [the Land Bank] can't turn around their property fast enough. So they're havens for drugs and prostitution. Any house that is unkempt, boarded-up windows, broken-down windows, that's a Land Bank house."

Douglas Weiland, the Land Bank's executive director, concedes that criticism of maintenance is

"fair," but ascribes it to economic factors beyond the agency's control. Early on, fewer than a thousand properties a year fell into the Land Bank's possession. Then came the housing crisis. This year, it has received title to 2,700 properties. It's also involved in a lawsuit with the county board over money from the delinquent tax fund, which comes from penalties paid by tardy taxpayers. Previously, that money had been used to maintain Land Bank properties. But Genesee County is so broke the commissioners want the cash to balance the budget. As a result, the Land Bank can only afford to mow lawns and pick up trash once a year, and now boards up houses "on a complaint basis," Weiland said.

(In the wake of Kildee's move to Washington, the Land Bank has faced unprecedented political hurdles. "He was the chairman, he was the visionary, he was the founder, he was the spokesman," Hegarty said. "Dan was pretty visibly connected with it. There was a little bit of a hangover effect when Dan moved on.")

Among Flint's poorest residents, the Land Bank is viewed as an outrider of urban renewal — a loaded term in Flint since the 1960s, when black neighborhoods were demolished to make way for interstate highways. Kildee was once quoted as saying he wanted to shut down services to Flint's emptiest neighborhoods. So far, that hasn't been possible; although the Land Bank owns 17 percent of the city, it doesn't own an entire block.

Moose Fitch, who lives in Flint's decrepit North End, purchased a corner lot for \$200 through the Land Bank's side lot program, which sells vacant land to neighbors who promise to maintain it. Fitch used the land to add to his 9/11 Memorial, an inner-city crèche commemorating the victims of the World Trade Center bombing and the war in Afghanistan. Despite his interaction with the organization, he said the Land Bank spends too much of its money on trophy projects downtown while neglecting low-income neighborhoods. He fears that once the county agency accumulates enough land to build a housing development, it will clear him and his neighbors out.

"They're gonna keep the lots," Fitch predicted. "They're gonna say, 'We're gonna sit there and do what we did at the Renaissance' — a new subdivision near downtown Flint — "and you take what we offer, or we'll

force you out.” On the flip side, he appreciates the Land Bank for tearing down vacant houses on his block. “I guess they have helped out,” Fitch said, “because when the houses were around, I used to have to take my dogs out at night and chase out the crackheads “

These complaints are not unfamiliar to Kildee, who readily concedes that his model “does favor downtowns.” But revitalizing the downtown core, he insists, is a necessary first step to revitalizing an entire city.

“Our ability to do what we’ve done in the neighborhoods, which gets no fanfare, and for which the Land Bank gets more grief than anything else, I think largely was enabled by the fact we were able to prove our mettle by doing these downtown projects,” he said.

Kildee himself is equally divisive. Critics say he used the Land Bank as a vehicle for the political brand he would ride out of town to Washington. When *Governing* magazine ran a profile of Kildee titled “The Man Who Owns Flint” in 2007, some locals recoiled at the notion that he had built an empire out of the nuisance lots that others were left to live alongside.

“By trying to solve Flint’s problem of abandoned housing, he’s taking ownership of a vexing problem,” said Flint native Gordon Young, author of *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City*. “His personality is not such that he’s going to bob and weave. He’s out front. He’s accessible. In a weird way, he’s kind of getting blamed for a problem created by others that he’s trying to solve.”

THE AIRING OF GRIEVANCES

Stepping behind the foundation of the house on Jane Street, Kildee reminisces about his uncle, Dale Kildee, who represented Flint in Congress for 36 years before retiring in 2012. “This backyard had beautiful flowers,” Kildee says. “My uncle studied in Pakistan, and I remember him bringing a scholar from the University of Peshawar here.”

In Flint, it was always considered a *fait accompli* that Kildee would take his uncle’s seat in Congress. Uncle and nephew even had a little two-man routine about the succession. “How are you feeling?” Dan would ask Dale, who served until the age of 83. “Hmm,” the older man would respond. “Why do you

ask, Dan?”

Kildee, 55, won the seat handily, with 66 percent of the vote in his heavily Democratic district. As soon as he took office, he began operating like a Rust Belt mayor lobbying for economic disaster aid. Before Flint and fellow legacy cities can rebuild, Kildee repeated like a mantra, they need to deal with two burdensome civic disorders: crime and blight.

These are especially acute in Flint. The city’s 60-per-100,000 murder rate is the highest in the country. (If New York City were as lethal as the Vehicle City, it would have 5,000 murders a year — twice as many as during the Crack Wars of the ’80s and early ’90s, and 12 times as many as today.) Flint has 13,000 vacant lots and 4,000 empty houses. With the average house selling for \$15,000, residents have been walking away from their homes faster than the city can bulldoze them. Few people are willing to move to a place where crack dealers sell drugs behind boarded-up windows and dump their rivals’ bodies in weedy lots.

“The idea is to give these cities a fighting chance,” Kildee said. “We’ve got to be able to make them clean and green, and secure, and then there will be urban pioneers who will be interested in commercializing their next big idea, and they’re going to be looking for places that have an available workforce, and infrastructure in place, and low land costs. But if these places are full of abandoned houses and have crime rates that are continuing to grow, they’re going to go somewhere else.”

Kildee started by asking the House Appropriations Committee to increase funding to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms so it could dispatch agents to assist overwhelmed police departments of high-crime cities like Flint, where the mayor laid off 40 percent of the force in 2011. (On some Saturday nights, as few as six officers have patrolled the city’s 34 square miles, and the department can take nearly an hour to respond to shootings.) Kildee didn’t ask blindly. In 2012, the ATF sent officers to Flint for a four-month “intelligence-based policing” program, targeting known criminals with guns. In that period, the gun-related crime rate fell by 50 percent.

“When they concentrate their efforts, they can have an effect on violent crime,” Kildee said. The Appropriations Committee denied his request.

As a freshman representative in the Democratic

minority, Kildee realized he would need to employ extra-legislative maneuvers to bring money home. He drafted a bill, the [Revitalize America Act](#), to allow 25 percent of the \$7.6 billion Hardest Hit Program to go toward demolition. The program was intended to help victims of the foreclosure crisis, so it seemed fair to give some to cities where the housing bubble had turned entire blocks into a scene from a residential rapture. Five Ohio representatives had introduced a similar bill, the [Restore our Neighborhoods Act](#), to provide \$4 billion in bond money for demolition. That bill was going nowhere, and neither was Kildee's.

So he arranged a meeting with Timothy Massad, the Treasury's assistant secretary for financial stability, at which he made the case that housing demolition increases economic activity in shrinking cities. Kildee quoted a [Michigan State University study](#), which found that an empty house within 500 feet of a home in Flint reduces its value by up to 2.27

The demo dollar win represented a triumph for Kildee's theory of revitalization. If you live in, say, Potomac, Md., it can be hard to comprehend how knocking a hole in the middle of a block can create more value for neighbors. It makes more sense in an upside-down market such as Flint, where property values have declined 75 percent since the mid-2000s.

"In a lot of markets, demolition is a net negative," Kildee said. "You take something of value and remove it from the landscape, and whatever value is there is erased from the overall market equation. In stressed markets, it's not the same thing. You demolish a structure that immediately has an aesthetic effect on the neighborhood, and has the effect, one house at the time, of rebalancing the supply and demand equation."

Demolition may be the answer for Flint, but it's not the answer for every legacy city. Much of Flint's housing stock consists of 800-square-foot wooden frame houses thrown up during the employment boom

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percent, but that a nearby vacant lot may increase a home's value, because it creates "a perception of more open space or lower housing density." Spending \$3.5 million on demolition increased Flint property values by \$112 million in 2005, according to the study. The Treasury agreed to allow Michigan to spend \$100 million of its Hardest Hit funds on demolition. Flint got \$20.1 million, which will pay to tear down 2,000 houses, according to Weiland — still less than half of what the city would like to demolish.

"Dan clearly had the ability to call a meeting and get Treasury to bring out half the office," said the Brookings Institution's Mallach, who attended the meeting to provide data on the economic value of demolition. "It's clear that he carried enough weight with them that they felt the need to make a pilgrimage to the Hill."

of the 1920s and '30s. General Motors built Civic Park, one of Flint's now-struggling neighborhoods, at the rate of four homes a day for workers who previously had been sleeping in tents. Those houses are obsolete, too small for modern living, and rotted by decades of hard Michigan winters. In St. Louis, on the other hand, an older city with sturdy brick dwellings, activists fought to use block grant money for preservation and historic districts instead of demolition.

"The Flint model — I would hate to see federal planners get behind that as something appropriate for the entire country," said Michael Allen, director of the Preservation Research Office in St. Louis. Disagreements over revitalization tactics aside, urban advocates such as Allen were pleasantly surprised in February when Kildee spoke up for distressed cities at a House Financial Services Committee meeting.

How, he asked Bernanke, could the Fed pursue a policy to avoid municipal failure, or municipal bond defaults? Kildee spoke in a deep, nasal voice, lending his questions a blue-collar roughness that made them sound less wonkish than they actually are. (He has lectured at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, but, sidetracked by politics, didn't even graduate from college until 2011, when he returned to Central Michigan University to complete his degree in administration.) Bernanke responded with a vague call for job creation before conceding, "I don't really have a solution."

"The federal government has not, in the past, involved itself that much with those distressed municipalities," Bernanke said.

That wasn't good enough for Kildee.

"The federal government hasn't involved itself in a lot of things until the necessity appeared," he responded. "What I'm concerned with is the state government may not have the capacity, and the cities' failing will be a national problem, and I suggest we might pursue how the federal government might intervene."

In a White House meeting the following month, Kildee pressed the same point, badgering President Obama on what the federal government was doing to create jobs in Michigan.

"I can tell you're a freshman," Obama cracked, "because you didn't pay much attention to the State of the Union." (In his State of the Union address, Obama had promised to create three Manufacturing Innovation Institutes, where businesses and universities will collaborate on industrial research.)

It was a private meeting, but a congressman in attendance tweeted the exchange. Kildee thought that "totally inappropriate," but it [got him on CNN](#), where he told Wolf Blitzer why Michigan needs federal investment, including an Institute. (The first Institute has opened in Youngstown, Ohio, but the president hasn't committed to a Michigan site.)

Detroit's declaration of bankruptcy, in July, fulfilled Kildee's prediction about the widespread consequences of failing to support financially strapped cities. A week after the announcement, Genesee County was unable to float a water infrastructure bond because buyers demanded outrageous interest rates to invest in a Michigan city. The reaction to Detroit's insolvency

also fulfilled Kildee's expectations. Although millions of people contributed to creating the pension obligations that sank Detroit, conservatives placed the blame entirely on the city's current population: 678,000 Detroiters — a third of the city's peak population — either too poor or too stubborn to move to the suburbs. Columnist George Will blamed "cultural factors," such as high-school dropouts and unwed mothers, for Detroit's downfall.

Six days later, Kildee became the first congressman to [speak about the bankruptcy](#) on the House floor.

"Detroit's bankruptcy should be a call to action to have a much bigger conversation about how we support and fund our cities," he said. "Bankruptcy for Detroit will not be a solution to its problems or for any other city... You can simply dissolve a corporation through bankruptcy, but you can't dissolve a city."

(Not everyone agreed. Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina introduced a resolution to prohibit a federal bailout of a city.)

Kildee also challenged the idea that emergency managers — officials appointed by the state to oversee the finances of Detroit and Flint — can rescue cities from financial failure. "The solutions have been replacing existing management with new management that presumably will make different decisions that result in outcomes that are more favorable," he said. "I think we're facing a structural failure."

When I met Kildee in Flint, he took me to the Berridge Hotel, a former flophouse that the Land Bank bought for \$950,000 in 2006 and rehabbed into trendy loft apartments. The development, called Berridge Place Lofts, helped demonstrate to Kildee that the Land Bank — and, by extension, government — can play a role in places the free market can't or won't touch. And no place fits that definition better than his hometown, which was built and then abandoned by what was once the world's largest corporation. This idea that government can and should play a direct role in community development is Kildee's deepest political belief, the one he went to Congress to prove.

"The notion that there is something like the pure free market operating in any community is a quaint, debunked theory," he said. "We're picking winners and losers right now, and we're picking the wrong ones. We're actually making matters worse

by not intervening in these communities. It's fine for people to say that it's okay for Flint to *be* one of the losers. It's not fine for Flint to be one of the losers, as far as I'm concerned."

If media hits were the metric to judge Flint's winningness, one could say there has been an improvement. Since taking office in January, Kildee has been anything but shy. In September, the perpetually-five-o'clock-shadowed congressman **appeared on *The Colbert Report*** for its "Better Know a District" feature. Madonna, it turns out, was born in the 5th District, in Bay City. The host crouched behind the congressman's chair and posed his stiff arms into vogue position, like a backup dancer in a Madonna video.

But the closest Colbert ventured to the subject

and contribute something to the national experience and to the national economy, or will continue to be a drain."

THE TALLEST PAINTER

Back in Michigan's Saginaw Valley, the only congressman for three media markets — Flint, Saginaw and Bay City — is a big celebrity. One Tuesday in August, Kildee begins a day in his district with a Habitat for Humanity house painting in Buena Vista (pronounced *byoo-na vista*) Township, outside Saginaw. Kildee returned from a trip to Israel the night before, and still looks bleary when he arrives at noon, greeted by a reporter from a local TV station and a newspaper. In New York or Chicago, a congressman

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of urban renewal was joking that you could buy the entire city of Flint for the same price as a vintage Corvette, and suggesting that Kildee campaign on a pledge to bring all the manufacturing jobs back to his district. A five-minute interview on a satirical news program was not the right forum for Kildee's philosophy of government intervention in struggling cities, which so far doesn't have much resonance outside the Rust Belt — the two co-sponsors on his Revitalize America Act were Rep. Gary Peter (D-Mich.) and Rep. Mike Turner (R-Ohio). It's hard to convince the rest of the nation that the people of Flint and Detroit deserve the same federal help as the hurricane victims of New Orleans and New Jersey. Michigan's problems are seen as self-inflicted, not natural disasters. But Kildee believes this is the right moment for his message.

"We all have a stake in the Detroit of America, and they're going to continue to exist," he said. "We don't get to sell them to Canada. These are our people, and this is a community that will either be productive

would have to commit a crime to get as much media coverage as Kildee does for painting a house.

At 6'2", Kildee is the tallest painter on the site, so when someone shouts, "We either need a ladder or congressman to reach this," he goes to work brushing Blue Twilight between the top of the garage door and the eaves. It's a one-story ranch-style house with sagging gutters and loose shingles, owned by a single mother of three children. She bought it at a foreclosure sale for \$16,500 — a price no one on Kildee's staff thinks is a bargain. After all, it's still more than the average house in Flint.

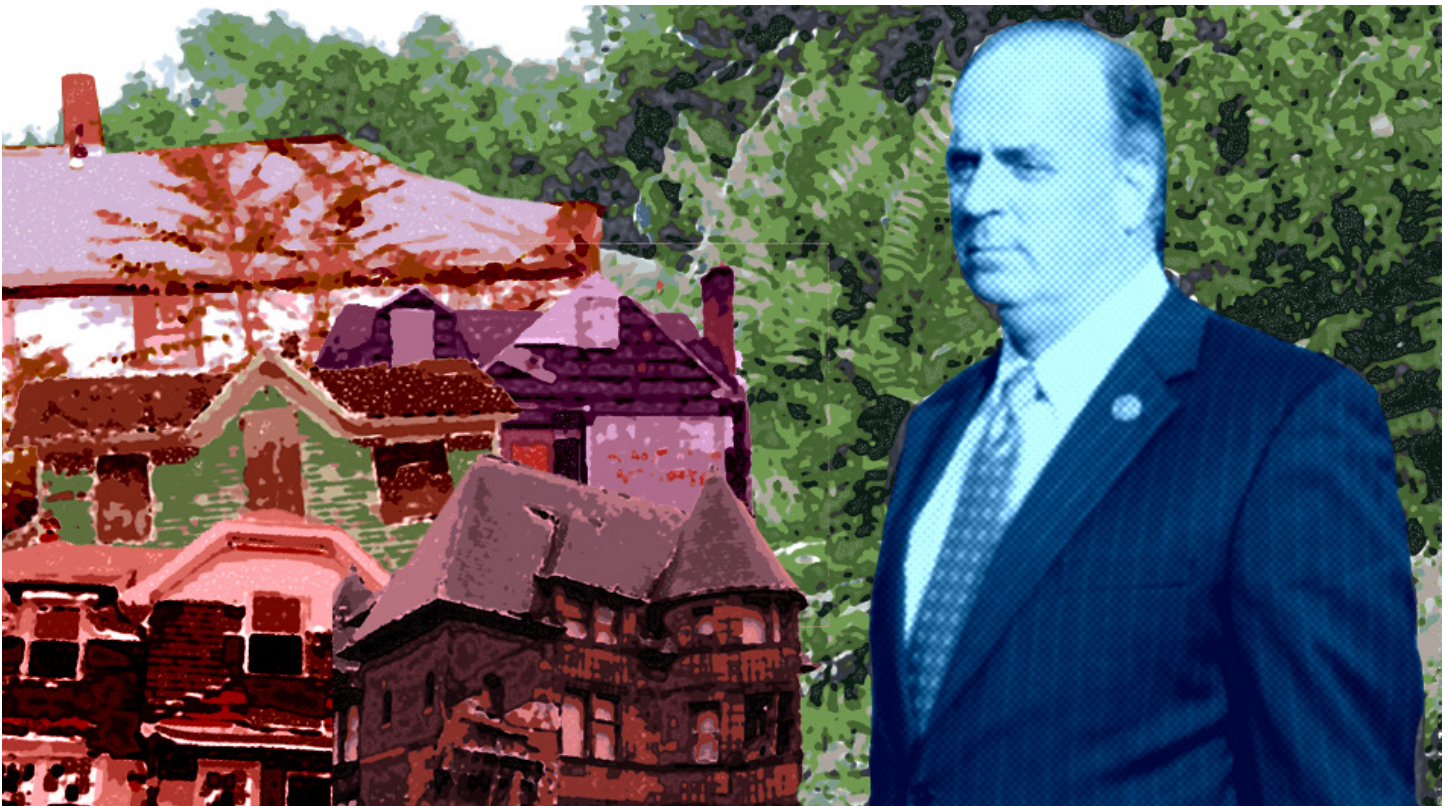
When the TV cameras go on, Kildee bashes a Republican bill that would eliminate federal mortgage guarantees, making low down payments and long-term repayments too risky for lenders. "Right now, there is a big battle in Congress over what role the federal government will play in homeownership," he says. "They're proposing making a 30-year fixed mortgage a thing of the past. Homeownership will

be impossible for the poor. It would make it difficult for this kind of neighborhood.” (Kildee supports an alternate strategy floated by Democrats that would cap the amount that can be applied to the mortgage interest deduction. This would accomplish two of his goals: Remove an incentive for buying huge suburban homes, and add revenue to the treasury.)

He poses for a photo with the homeowner before stopping at a park field house to change into a blocky pinstriped suit with the Congressional pin on its lapel. This is the interview suit he will wear for two

his children. (Kildee’s alma mater now has a 63 percent graduation rate.)

“I don’t mean to nuance this, but I draw a distinction between the built and the unbuilt environment, and that’s one of my big arguments, that we need to start thinking about functioning metros,” he explains. “We wanted to be in the functioning metro, which we’re in. What would have kept me right in the city of Flint would have been school curriculum and opportunity for my kids that was consistent with their academic needs.”



television appearances that evening.

Fellow Flintoid Michael Moore also uses a non-cosmopolitan accent and a figure built on Coney Islands to present himself as a down-to-earth Rust Belter. But Moore left Flint decades ago, for a condo in Manhattan and million-dollar cottage in Northern Michigan. Kildee also left Flint — for the suburb of Flint Township. A Flint Northern High School graduate who lived in the city for the first 44 years of his life, Kildee moved to the ‘burbs for the same reasons most people do: A bigger house and better schools for

When Kildee talks more about Detroit’s bankruptcy, he stresses that it was not inevitable. Had suburbanites agreed to share a tax base with the city they abandoned — as suburban voters have done in more successful metro such as Indianapolis, Miami, Nashville and Charlotte—the city would be on far more solid financial footing. (This lack of intergovernmental cooperation is, of course, inextricable from the racial antagonism dating back to the 1967 riot.)

“We have to start by convincing people in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. that Detroit is their problem,

too,” Kildee says. “We have a bold challenge, and the challenge is getting folks to realize that if the cities become more productive, less a drain on governmental services and our society in general, we become more competitive as a nation. The people next door have deluded themselves into the belief that they can do well and the people in Detroit can fail, as if one doesn’t have a huge effect on the other.”

After the TV interview we head over to the Durant, where Kildee, a non-stop public policy wind-up toy, wants to talk about immigration reform. As he does with every political question, he finds a way to make it about reviving Flint’s fortunes.

“Immigration reform has the potential for being great for legacy cities,” he says. “Every American city that went through a period of ascendancy had a very strong base of migrants who were entrepreneurs. In many cases, they brought the things to come here for.”

Louis Chevrolet, who designed one of the cars that lent Flint its identity, was himself born in

Switzerland — the Chevy logo is based on the Swiss cross. The [EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program](#), which requires less investment in high-unemployment cities, could lure a new generation of foreign businessmen to Flint.

“You can’t send people to Flint,” Kildee said, “but we can create a really immigrant-friendly environment here. We can work with the INS to say if folks were willing to plant themselves here, we can provide technical help, we can provide lending, we can provide space. All the commercial space we have here, which is pretty substantial, could be a great source of incubation.”

It will never again be the Flint his grandmother knew — a city where a high school graduate could work an auto plant job and hold onto it for his entire life — but nowhere in the U.S. will ever again be like that, either. What Flint can be, Kildee hopes, is a place where a high school graduate can go and work many different jobs, but hold onto the city for his entire life.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward McClelland was born in Lansing, Mich. His book *Nothin' But Blue Skies: The Heyday, Hard Times and Hopes of America's Industrial Heartland* was released in May 2013 by Bloomsbury Press and was inspired by seeing the Fisher Body plant across the street from his old high school torn down. His book *The Third Coast: Sailors, Strippers, Fishermen, Folksingers, Long-Haired Ojibway Painters and God-Save-the-Queen Monarchists of the Great Lakes* won the 2008 Great Lakes Book Award in General Nonfiction. Like so many Michiganders of his generation, he now lives in Chicago.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Lauren Adolfsen is a designer and illustrator based in Los Angeles. In May 2011 Lauren received her MFA in Graphic Design from Yale School of Art. Since 2003, Lauren has made claymation shorts and sold retail products under the name Snack Mountain. You can read about her latest projects at blog.snackmountain.com.