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Detroit hindered by loss of clout

By Mark Hornbeck / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

LANSING--The flight of population to the suburbs has cost Detroit representation and clout in the state capital at a time when the city can least afford it.

That loss in power hurts Detroit's ability to win funding for some of the ills of segregation, whether they be added services for a poorer population or money to maintain an aging infrastructure built for almost twice the population.

High on Detroit's agenda in the state capital will be regional transportation and sewer infrastructure issues, as well as economic redevelopment and land-use issues, said House Minority Leader Samuel "Buzz" Thomas, D-Detroit.

The Detroit legislative delegation dwindled from 26 House members and senators after the 1980 census. It now stands at 18 and is expected to lose at least four more seats as a result of redrawn districts based on last year's census, which saw Detroit's population dip below 1 million.

Sen. Burton Leland, D-Detroit, who arrived in Lansing in 1981 as a House member, said he doesn't believe segregation plays a role in Detroit's problems. But the loss of representation has put the city in a



Dale G. Young / The Detroit News

House Minority Leader Samuel "Buzz" Thomas, D-Detroit, sees Detroit's fortunes in the Legislature looking better.

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Detroit's problems. But the loss of representation has put the city in a defensive mode compared to the height of its power.

"We had a whole lot of sway," Leland said. "We could take those (20) members in the House and vote as a bloc ... Now we don't have anywhere near that same kind of clout."

Leland believes Gov. John Engler has been less sympathetic to Detroit causes than previous governors.

"He took the attitude there are no votes in Detroit for him, his votes are from out-county, outstate," Leland said.

Engler has denied that charge, saying he has focused much of his energy on the state's largest city, including passage of brownfields legislation and no-tax zones that have revitalized portions of the business district.

Detroit's diminished clout can be linked to both population loss and lingering racism, said Detroit political consultant Mario Morrow. "I think that has a lot to do with hidden racism from the suburbs in Metro Detroit and also outstate," he said.

No matter the cause, Lansing-based pollster and political consultant Ed Sarpolus said Detroit leaders must build new coalitions with the suburbs.

"That's why you're seeing Kwame Kilpatrick talking more like a regional mayor than a city mayor," he said. "Detroit can no longer go it alone."

Minority Leader Thomas, who succeeded Kilpatrick, sees signs that the city's fortunes in Lansing could be changing.

"I now have this role in the Legislature and Kwame won't be shy about asking his former friends in Lansing for assistance for the city," he said.

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