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The Cost of Segregation || Part III: Where We're Headed

Diverse Southfield strives to defy divide

Mayor details how segregation influences area

By The Detroit News

Brenda Lawrence is the changing face of Southfield. Elected mayor just months after the 2000 census confirmed the city's status as a majority-black city, Lawrence became its first African-American mayor.

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Brenda Lawrence
Southfield mayor

Lawrence talked to The News about how one of Metro Detroit's most diverse communities fits into the issue of segregation. Excerpts:

Q: To many Metro Detroit political leaders, the area's position as the nation's most segregated isn't a negative. What's your view?

A: Being able to hear the stories from my grandmother of how segregation started, the history of why we were separated, makes me say it can't be viewed as a positive thing. ... The sad part is, (segregation) is now willful and deliberate. People are making choices to segregate themselves. It's not like in the past, when there were horrible acts of slavery and discrimination. ... Those things have been removed, yet the pattern persists.

Q: Southfield has long been open to people of diverse backgrounds, but in the past two decades, many of its neighborhoods have rapidly turned from mostly white to mostly black. What does that mean about Southfield's role in Metro Detroit's segregation?

A: Southfield has a wonderful opportunity to make the statement that it's OK to be in a city that's diverse and integrated. ... I've listened to (white) people talk openly in my own neighborhood about how they didn't want to move. But then they're in a place like the beauty salon, and their friends ask, "Well, are you still there?" There's almost a social pressure against living with people who aren't like you. The opportunity and challenge Southfield has is to say we don't have to think that way.

Q: Many whites have left the city, but the other side of the puzzle is that African-Americans moving to the suburbs have chosen Southfield. Why is that?

SITE INDEX

- Homepage
- Search
- CyberSurveys
- ▶ News Talk
- ▶ Autos Talk
- ▶ Sports Talk
- ▶ Lions Talk
- ▶ Pistons Talk
- ▶ Wings Talk
- ▶ Tiger Talk
- ▶ Tech Talk
- Horoscope
- Hot Sites
- Lottery
- Recommendations
- Weather
- Staff

NEWS

- Autos
- ▶ Insider
- ▶ Auto Show
- ▶ Consumer
- ▶ Joyrides
- Business
- Careers
- Census
- Columnists
- Commuting
- Detroit History
- Editorials
- Health
- Metro / State
- ▶ Livingston
- ▶ Macomb
- ▶ Oakland
- ▶ Wayne
- ▶ On Detroit
- Nation / World
- Obituaries
- ▶ Death Notices
- Politics / Govt.
- Real Estate
- Religion
- Schools
- Special Reports
- Technology

SPORTS

- Sports Home
- ▶ Lions/NFL
- ▶ Red Wings/NHL
- ▶ Pistons/NBA
- ▶ Shock/WNBA
- ▶ Tigers/Baseball
- ▶ MSU
- ▶ U-M
- More Colleges

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[Golf Guide](#)
[High Schools](#)
[Motor Sports](#)
[Outdoors](#)
[More Sports](#)
[Scoreboards](#)

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[Entertainment](#)
[▶ Casino Guide](#)
[▶ Movie Finder](#)
[▶ TV Listings](#)
[Crossword](#)

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[▶ Decorating](#)
[▶ Food](#)
[▶ Gardening](#)
[▶ Home Improvement](#)
[▶ Home Life](#)
[▶ Home Tech](#)
[▶ Wine Report](#)

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[Sports](#)
[Red Wings](#)
[Lions](#)
[Autos](#)
[Joyrides](#)
[News](#)
[History](#)

A: I attribute that to history. In the Detroit area you've always had one of the country's strongest and proudest African-American communities. African Americans in Detroit are used to a very strong, connected community. ... There was a time when we were forced to live in a certain area; we didn't have options. That created a strength of community, a desire for connections, that's still there.

Q: Should government policy play a role in countering segregation?

A: When you say "policy" I think in terms of laws and legislation, and no, I don't see that as a proper role. But I do see government having a strong role. A good example would be providing funding for programs that promote outreach and bring people together, that push people to communicate.

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