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### For unions, mayoral election may be more about the show than outcome

By Nancy Kaffer

Back in June, the **American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees** offered its endorsement for the upcoming Detroit mayoral election to incumbent Dave Bing.

Just three months later, things had changed.

Amid tough wage and benefit negotiations, the union withdrew that endorsement, extending its approval instead to challenger Tom Barrow. In the following weeks, Barrow raked in a slew of endorsements from other labor unions.

Barrow finished second in the August primary, but with just 10,302 votes — 68,623 ballots were cast for Bing. For Barrow to defeat Bing would require a massive electoral shift.

And a union endorsement isn't likely to change those numbers substantially.

“Any support you get is support, and unions are good for money,” said pollster Mark Grebner, a partner in Lansing-based **Practical Political Consulting**. “But they're going to what, help Tom Barrow get 20 percent of the vote? They should be proud if they can get 20,000 votes.”

As Detroit's population has dropped, so has the number of union members living inside the city, an exodus hastened by a 1999 decision to lift a requirement that city workers live in Detroit.

Before the current round of municipal layoffs, Detroit had about 13,500 workers, said Edward Cardenas, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing's press secretary. About 11,800 of those employees belong to unions; roughly 7,400 unionized city workers live in Detroit.

Union endorsements didn't tip the outcome of the past three Detroit mayoral elections. In 2001 and 2005, unions backed Gil Hill and Freman Hendrix. Both lost to former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. This spring, unions supported then-Interim Mayor Ken Cockrel Jr., defeated by Bing in a May special election.

“Union endorsements are still important; however, union workers tend to only follow union endorsements if the offices have a direct impact on union jobs,” said Steve Mitchell, chairman of Lansing-based **Mitchell Research and Communications Inc.** “When municipal unions endorse, it means they can generally deliver at least the members of the unions. It doesn't mean other people are going to follow suit.”

But Al Garrett, AFSCME Michigan Council 25 president, said that in this election, Barrow doesn't have to win for the union to come out ahead.

“I think we don't expect to generate the votes alone to win this election,” he said. “There's a vast difference from where Barrow was and where Bing is. If we were to generate a 40 percent change in the vote, that would be significant, but it doesn't translate to a win. We hope to show we can impact an election where there is less of a gap.”

Garrett claims that AFSCME can touch 23,000 Detroiters.

“That's members of AFSCME or family members residing in the city of Detroit, and the **AFL-CIO** numbers are probably twice that of ours,” he said.

The union's sanction promises more than votes, Garrett said.

“It means some dollars, it means soldiers on the ground, phone banking,” he said. “We're going to fight to win, but I don't think this election is the measuring stick. ... If we demonstrate power, it's a win, period.”

Garrett said that with a career politician, a strong union showing could change the outcome of negotiations — though he says the union objects to Bing's accessibility and transparency, not the mayor's proposed concessions. With Bing, who has said he'll serve only one full term, a strong showing could change the tone at the bargaining table.

In races won or lost by smaller margins, the union's blessing is more potent, Mitchell said.

“It's much more important for city council candidates than mayoral candidates,” he said. “Union endorsements could be enough to pull a candidate over the finish line. When a candidate is very well known, it's a different story, but in council races and charter commission races, you want to get on slates, you want to get endorsed by newspapers ... but the bigger the race, the less union endorsement matters.”

Grebner says there's another factor at work.

“We've now had three elections in the last eight months, and we had terrible turnouts every time,” he said, comparing the roughly 95,000 Detroiters who voted in the May special election to the approximately 210,000 voters who cast ballots in 2005.

“What this tells me is that this is the hard-core electorate. There are 35,000 or 40,000 old people who vote with absentee ballots, then there are the hard-core voters.

“There are some union members, but the typical voter is 65 years old, female and votes in every election. ... If the electorate was larger, union endorsements might make a difference. But this electorate is this defined group of people that keeps voting in every election.”

For that voter, the endorsement of one's own pastor is the most critical, Mitchell said.

“The city continues to lose population, and the major factor in municipal elections or elections in other urban areas, especially areas with a high African-American population, is really the local church,” Mitchell said. “Fifty-seven percent of the voters (in a Detroit election) will be female as opposed to 52 percent statewide. This is a stable population of older women, and part of that stability is that they tend to go to church.”

Detroit's population has shrunk to about 770,000, according to the most recent American Community Survey, an annual survey performed by the **U.S. Census**, said Kurt Metzger, director of the **Detroit Area Community Information System**.

“I think conservatively you could say that the city has lost 130,000 to 140,000 people in the last eight years,” he said. “When you look at the age structure, kids have left in large numbers, meaning parents with kids, oftentimes married couples with kids. The fact that people who leave tend to be the ones who care more about things and have more of the economic base from which to leave ... I think obviously the city is losing its middle class.”

Those who remain, Metzger said, are often disconnected from the politics.

“When you think about how many people are just trying to keep the lights on and the heat on, I don't think they give a freaking damn about elections,” he said. “What you've got is a city that's becoming poorer, with an unemployment rate of 45 percent to 50 percent in real terms. ... People don't see politics as the answer. A larger and larger share of the population is totally removed from government, because they're just trying to make it through the day.”

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