

MI DEMS TO BENTON HARBOR: YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN

Eclectablog, who has been doing solid reporting on the takeover of Benton Harbor by an Emergency Financial Manager, has been wondering why MI's Democratic Party hasn't been more vociferous in supporting Benton Harbor. Today, he reported that MI Dems Chair Mark Brewer told Berrien County's Dems that the MDP would not help them.

The occasion was the monthly meeting of the South County Democratic Club in Berrien County. Commissioner Dennis Knowles was in attendance. According to Commissioner Knowles, with whom I have spoken, Chair Brewer informed him that the MDP "could not help Benton Harbor" though he encouraged their recall effort of Rep. Al Pscholka. The MDP, however, will not assist in any way. In other words, Benton Harbor is on their own.

Now, while I don't always agree with Brewer's tactics, I respect his pragmatism, so I suspect part of what's going on is driven by funding and/or a sense of the viability of recall efforts (the Snyder recall, in particular, would be really difficult to pull off because of the way our recall law is written).

But I also suspect something else is going on. Remember, Democrats in MI have themselves supported the concept of Emergency Financial Managers. In fact Jennifer Granholm's administration put Pontiac and Benton Harbor itself into EFM status. So while Dems might be happy to knock off some Republican State Reps, they apparently remain committed to a city-based approach to financial stability. And that, it seems, stems at least partly from the way race has played out in this state.

As I noted before, one of the key factors

contributing to Benton Harbor's awful state is racism. Ditto Detroit, the schools of which are widely assumed to be the next target for Snyder's EFM law. In both cases, a long history of segregation has resulted in the loss of the tax base of the city as more affluent whites left. The proper financial solution to that problem should have been more regionalized funding, but that wasn't politically viable. Remember—MI is the home of the Reagan Democrats, the working class whites whom Reagan persuaded to put social issues ahead of their own class interest.

The thing is, it probably could be today. Or could have been just after the 2008 election. Here's what Stan Greenberg said at that point when he claimed—prematurely, given the rise of the TeaPartiers—the Reagan Democrats were dead.

For more than 20 years, the non-college-educated white voters in Macomb County have been considered a "national political barometer," as Ronald Brownstein of National Journal described them during the Democratic convention in August. After Ronald Reagan won the county by a 2-to-1 margin in 1984, Mr. Brownstein noted, I conducted focus groups that "found that these working-class whites interpreted Democratic calls for economic fairness as code for transfer payments to African-Americans." So what do we think when Barack Obama, an African-American Democrat, wins Macomb County by eight points?

I conducted a survey of 750 Macomb County residents who voted Tuesday, and their responses put their votes in context. Before the Democratic convention, barely 40 percent of Macomb County voters were "comfortable" with the idea of Mr. Obama as president, far below the number who were comfortable with a nameless Democrat. But on Election Day, nearly 60 percent said

they were “comfortable” with Mr. Obama. About the same number said Mr. Obama “shares your values” and “has what it takes to be president.”

Given Macomb’s history, this story helps illustrate America’s evolving relationship with race. These voters, like voters elsewhere, watched Mr. Obama intently and became confident he would work for all Americans and be the steady leader the times required.

For a brief period in 2008, MI (which is a pretty damned segregated state) put aside its legacy of racism in hopes a black President could bring benefits for all Americans. (Then Republicans used Obama’s imperfect effort to do that—in the form of health care—to stoke that racism again.)

It seems to me, Democrats need to finally, enthusiastically embrace a model that puts collective well-being at the center of a plan to respond to globalization, rather than letting black cities suffer the twin plights of racism and globalization. And that ought to include not only some political support for Benton Harbor’s fight for democracy, but also some creative solutions that don’t amount to starving cash strapped cities all in the name of short term—and short-sighted—fiscal responsibility.