

Detroit wants nearly \$2.5B to fix infrastructure, bridge digital divide and expand services



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Voice of the community, Rev. Cynthia Lowe of United Outreach of Detroit, and the Pavedway Block Club President, speaks about how happy she is about the announcement of the redevelopment of more than 50 acres encompassing the former American Motors Corporation headquarters Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. The AMC headquarters was shut down in 2010. The new developer, NorthPoint, is planning a \$66 million employment center for hundreds of jobs in Detroit. *Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press*

From broadband to public lighting, longtime resident Cynthia Lowe has sought basic necessities in Detroit.

Depending on how much federal funding Detroit can persuade the state to funnel from President Joe Biden's \$1.2-trillion infrastructure law, the Barton-McFarland neighborhood resident said she wants more to go toward public lighting and efforts to prevent illegal dumping at sites primed for new

industrial use. Those are on her wish list -- city leaders are working on their own -- as Detroiters wait on various federal dollars and eye the city's biggest needs.

Lowe said she spent part of her career as a head storekeeper with the city's public lighting department, where she placed orders for cables, lighting, underground wires and any materials needed. She said she has seen nearly every substation for the city, which at one point were "state of the art" but because the infrastructure was already old, it would eventually deteriorate due to a lack of funding and high costs to properly update them.

"We were still doing public lighting, cable splicing and electrical work back like they did 100 years ago ... nobody would give the city money," Lowe said of her time at the department between 1982 and 2005. "When they brought new electricians in ... they had to retrain them on how to do things the ancient way."

Although she said they may have come a long way since, another plight Detroiters struggle with is internet connectivity, an issue that Mayor Mike Duggan has addressed.

"The system is so bad that our internet was always going out, the TV was going out. And technicians just told me: 'The city system, especially over here, it's just so bad. Nobody has done any work over here.' And it's so expensive to do it. They're not doing it. I had to switch over to another more expensive company," Lowe said of her internet provider.



Mayor Mike Duggan speaks during the announcement of the opening round of Motor City Match on Livernois Avenue in Detroit on Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021. *Junfu Han, Detroit Free Press*

Duggan told the Free Press that between the new infrastructure law and American Rescue Plan Act funding, the city will look at whether it can run fiber-optic cables to “every house in Detroit to eliminate the digital divide,” a gap between those who can afford reliable access to high-speed internet and updated hardware, and those who cannot. The city has already handed out laptops to low-income families in Detroit and made stipends available to reduce monthly internet bills. But it’s not enough, Duggan said.

“I expect us to be one of the first to do this. ... We're developing a plan right now ... to run fiber to every single house in Detroit,” Duggan said. “We want to leave behind a city where every single house is wired for fiber. Our children can have the same kind of access to internet connectivity, the ability to do videos, the ability to develop games and software connected with teachers and other people. We’re going to be a national leader in eliminating the digital divide.”

The city has a long list of priorities, totaling nearly \$2.5 billion needed to improve or expand on various projects and services. Officials say they are eyeing the billions of federal dollars pouring into the state to help finance these projects.



A view of Interstate 375 through downtown Detroit on April 23, 2021. The Michigan Department of Transportation is working on plans to replace I-375 with a boulevard because it is at the end of its useful life. *Kelly Jordan and Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press*

Detroit’s Priority Wish List

- \$350 million to transform Interstate 375 into a boulevard.
- \$100 million to clean up industrial land for redevelopments.
- \$450 million to complete streetscaping initiatives along state trunk lines, including \$88 million on Grand River Avenue, from Southfield Freeway to downtown, \$100 million on city roads and \$170 million on Gratiot Avenue from Eight Mile to downtown Detroit.
- \$175 million to modernize electric infrastructure, which includes removing Public Lighting Department infrastructure, underground streetlight power lines.
- \$25 million for expanding internet access.
- \$100 million to remove old Public Lighting infrastructure impacting the city's power, and another \$50 million to add fiber for broadband.
- \$51 million in small business support.
- \$400 million to replace lead service lines.
- \$100 million to fund construction of the Joe Louis Greenway, a 27.5-mile pedestrian and cyclist trail.
- \$105 million to fund home repairs, including roofs and sewer lines.
- \$74.6 million in workforce development and building a talent pipeline.
- \$13 million to increase GOAL line access for after-school programming.
- \$75 million to reduce violence in the city and on freeways.
- \$1.5 million to fund Detroit pre-K to ensure every 4-year-old has access to a full day of pre-K.
- \$50 million to improve Belle Isle.
- \$10 million to increase mental health services.

Hassan Beydoun, Duggan's senior counsel, said the dollar amount of the wish-list projects fluctuates weekly based on discussions with state officials on the different avenues of funding available.

"We convey our general list of asks to key legislators and the Administration on the front end of the process so that they're aware as they develop their agendas. But we also respond to the legislative agenda, meaning that if the Legislature and/or Governor decide to pursue a particular category of funding, then we pursue the related asks at that time," Beydoun said in an email.

Although an area such as mental health services would stem from other methods of funding, boosting services for Detroiters will help improve their overall quality of life, said Kenyatta Stephens, CEO of the Black Family Development Inc., or BFDI, an organization dedicated to neighborhood and community development.



Kenyatta Stephens, CEO of Black Family Development, Inc. on January 31, 2022. Stephens talks about the infrastructure law and the city asking 2.4 to fund roads, turning 375 into a boulevard, small businesses, streetscapes, mental health services, secure housing and behavioral health services. *Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press*

“Even prior to COVID, there has been a 65% increase in the mental health and suicide ideations of African American teens over the past 10 years,” Stephens said. “Behavioral health needs really do center around ways in which people can find relief and solace and knowing that they're really not alone, which is a strange thing, perhaps to say to people who've been dwelling in isolation because of COVID.”

Stephens said she wants to see more policies to continue funding resources like telehealth and substance abuse treatments to provide more universal access for Detroiters and individuals her group helps in surrounding communities.

“And so the more that we can do to really provide support to our citizens means that we have people who are better able to function in workforce development. They're able to stay on jobs so that they can contribute to the city's economy. It just makes for a better and stronger city all around,” Stephens said.

One of the organization's clients, Kaitlyn Preston of Westland, sought BFDI's peer and group support services, and emphasized that funding for mental health services would help normalize it.

“There is a big stigma behind mental health and seeking out services,” said Preston, 29. “Funding would change that. It would make it easier to seek out ... and show how much it could help the community in general.”



Kaitlyn Preston, 29, of Westland, inside Black Family Development, Inc in Detroit on January 28, 2022. Preston has been getting peer and group support with the organization since October 2021. Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press

Preston works as an Amazon delivery driver and often finds herself in Detroit. While the company trains employees to take extra safety precautions — especially for those like Preston, who begins her shift at 4:30 a.m. while it’s dark outside — she said maintaining street lighting is a huge factor for delivery drivers to reach their destinations on time.

“Everybody uses Amazon,” Preston said. “If we can't find a house, we will try our best to, but if it's that early in the morning, most people aren't going to answer so they have to wait. And it might not seem like a big deal but, I mean, having normal things happen is a huge deal for people. You want to live normally, you want to have what everybody else has. Your streetlight shouldn't change that.”

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