Beyond the Stitch

Power, Profit, and the Paradox of Detroit's I-75 Cap

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Introduction: The Stitch and the Substrate

On the evening of February 24, 2026—roughly seventy years after the Fisher Freeway severed Detroit's downtown from its northern neighborhoods—approximately fifty residents filed into the MSU Detroit Center on Woodward Avenue to discuss how to stitch the wound back together. The occasion was the second of four planned public meetings for the I-75 Cap Feasibility Study, the technical phase of a project that proposes building park-like structures over the sunken highway between Third Avenue and Brush Street. The project is led by the Downtown Detroit Partnership, a business-membership nonprofit whose mission statement—"We cultivate economic and social impact in Downtown Detroit"—was printed on banners that flanked the presentation screen on both sides.

The language of the evening was healing, reconnection, and community. AECOM's lead engineer, Jeremy Windsor, opened with the concession that "building the caps by themselves might not fully help reconnect communities." The presentation ran thirty minutes; the remaining sixty were devoted to a "Storytelling Booth" inviting memories of the demolished Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods. This ratio—half an hour of engineering, an hour of memory—established the meeting's operating logic: technical decisions had been made; community input was being channeled into commemorative design, not structural governance.

The political economist Peter Frase, in his taxonomy of possible futures, describes a condition he calls "Rentism": a world defined by technological abundance and extreme hierarchy, in which the elite provide the vision, the public provides the capital, and the private sector extracts the rent. This essay argues that the I-75 Cap—a feasible, competently engineered piece of urban infrastructure—is being constructed within a Rentist architecture. The question is not whether the caps can be built, but for whom

they are being built, who will own the value they create, and whether a city that has already seen its community benefits promises erode before the first building breaks ground can afford to defer these questions to a "future phase."

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I. The $200 Million Amenity: Public Infrastructure as Private Subsidy

The preferred design for the I-75 Cap—Option 4, a hybrid of three segmented caps—was selected in 2024 after an alternatives analysis. Its key engineering constraint is an NFPA 502 fire-safety threshold: any cap exceeding approximately 800 feet triggers mandatory tunnel-class ventilation requirements that would dramatically escalate costs. To remain below this threshold, the project fragments the park into three segments, each with "independent utility"—meaning each can be built as funding materializes. This is presented as a virtue of phased construction. But when the three caps are mapped against the $1.5 billion District Detroit development, the fragments align with something other than phasing logistics.

The western cap, spanning Grand River Avenue to Third Avenue, sits directly adjacent to the under-construction University of Michigan Center for Innovation—a $250 million facility scheduled to open in spring 2027—and the 2205 Cass Avenue residential tower, the first District Detroit building to break ground in March 2026. Federal fact sheets for the Reconnecting Communities grant explicitly note that the cap would "improve connections to UMCI." The eastern cap, from John R to Brush Street, provides the primary pedestrian link for Brush Park's luxury townhome corridor.

But it is the central cap—the 2.5-acre signature public space at Woodward Avenue—that reveals the entanglement most starkly. Tonight's presentation labeled this space not a memorial park, not a neighborhood commons, but a "Vibrant Hub within the Entertainment District." The labeling is not accidental. It is a declaration of purpose.

Two Hotels and a Park

Flanking the I-75 trench at Woodward Avenue are two planned District Detroit hotels totaling 467 rooms. On the south side, adjacent to Little Caesars Arena, sits a proposed 14-story, 290-room luxury hotel—a $190.5 million project originally announced by Stephen Ross at the 2022 Mackinac Policy Conference as an Equinox-branded property.

More than three years later, the final brand remains undetermined. At the December 2025 Community Benefits meeting, Olympia Development's Keith Bradford said he had been in discussions with potential operators for roughly five months and hoped to announce "in the very very near future." On the north side, at 2211 Woodward, the historic Fox Theatre Office Building is slated for adaptive reuse into a 177-room hotel, its redevelopment cost never publicly disclosed.

Neither hotel has broken ground. The LCA hotel was originally scheduled for construction no later than Q3 2024. Both timelines are now converging with the cap's final design phase.

Feature	LCA Arena Hotel	Fox Theatre Hotel
Address	2455 Woodward Ave	2211 Woodward Ave
Type	New Construction (14 stories)	Adaptive Reuse (10 stories)
Room Count	290	177
Disclosed Cost	$190.5 million	Never publicly disclosed
Brand	TBD (3+ years evaluating)	TBD
Groundbreaking	No date set	~6 months after LCA hotel
Cap Position	South of Central Cap	North of Central Cap

The spatial logic is inescapable. These two hotels sit on opposite sides of a six-lane sunken highway carrying 97,200 vehicles per day. No luxury hospitality flag commands premium room rates overlooking a concrete trench. In the hospitality industry, the metric that governs site selection is Revenue Per Available Room—revPAR—and revPAR is a function of environment. The Woodward Central Cap would transform that trench into a 2.5-acre park, providing the noise mitigation, curated green views, and pedestrian connectivity that constitute the environmental preconditions for luxury pricing. This is the mechanism by which public dollars convert into private asset appreciation. The cap is not proximate to these hotels. It is the connective tissue that makes a luxury hospitality corridor viable where a concrete trench currently exists.

The Klyde Warren Precedent

The DDP explicitly cites Dallas's Klyde Warren Park—a 5.2-acre cap over the Woodall Rodgers Freeway that opened in 2012 at a cost of $110 million—as the primary model. The economic data from Dallas quantifies what Detroit can expect. Property values within the surrounding Public Improvement District rose from $2.5 billion to over $8

billion since 2014, generating more than $660 million in cumulative incremental tax revenue. An independent study by HR&A Advisors found that residential development within a quarter-mile ran approximately $1.1 million per acre per year—roughly eight times the rate in surrounding neighborhoods. Office rents climbed 30 to 60 percent within two years of opening.

These are the numbers that make the I-75 Cap legible not as a parks project but as a real estate catalyst—and that make the ratio of private to public investment the essay's central exhibit.

The Ratio

During the Community Benefits Ordinance negotiations triggered by the District Detroit development, Olympia Development and Related Companies jointly pledged $400,000 toward the I-75 Cap feasibility study. The estimated construction cost is approximately $200 million in public funds. This produces a ratio of private contribution to public investment of roughly 1:500. The developers whose properties stand to appreciate most dramatically from the cap's construction have committed one five-hundredth of its cost. Representatives from both firms sit on the DDP stakeholder advisory group guiding the project's design.

Meanwhile, the same developers have received approximately $797 million in public incentives for the broader District Detroit project. And the very first building to break ground—the 2205 Cass residential tower adjacent to the western cap—has already seen its affordable housing requirement dismantled. In January 2025, the Michigan Strategic Fund Board voted to waive the affordable housing obligation after the University of Michigan announced a long-term lease of the entire building. The 54 affordable units originally promised were deferred to future, unbuilt buildings. More consequentially, the binding contractual commitment across all District Detroit residential buildings dropped from 139 affordable units to 85. The developers stated they "plan to honor" the full commitment—aspirational language in a document that had, until that moment, contained a binding number.

Detroit Free Press columnist Nancy Kaffer called it what it was: another broken promise. The pattern is structural, not incidental. Public subsidy flows in; binding commitments flow out. The I-75 Cap sits at the next frontier of this exchange.

The Funding Architecture—and Its Fragility

The roughly $9 million in pre-construction funding carries significant caveats. MDOT requested $5 million from the USDOT Reconnecting Communities Pilot program and received $2 million. The DDA and Make It In Michigan matching grants—totaling $5 million—were contingent on receiving the full federal request. Whether they were released in full remains unclear; DDP CEO Eric Larson has stated that approximately $6 million has gone into planning to date. The AECOM-led feasibility study launched in October 2025, with construction engineering expected in 2026–2027 and construction itself in 2028 or later.

The $200 million construction cost will require massive additional capital grants, and the federal landscape has shifted beneath the project's feet. The "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," signed July 4, 2025, rescinded approximately $2.4 billion in unobligated Neighborhood Access and Equity program funds—the same program that provided a $2 million planning grant for the I-75 Cap study. No new Reconnecting Communities funding round has been announced for FY2025 or FY2026. The project's equity framing will soon be seeking construction dollars from a federal apparatus that has systematically defunded the programs designed to support it.

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II. The Commemoration-Commodification Paradox

At the back of tonight's meeting room, past the rows of folding chairs and the DDP newsletter signup stations, was the Storytelling Booth. Residents and former residents were invited to share memories and memorabilia of the neighborhoods demolished to build the freeway—material the project team intends to incorporate into the commemorative design of the eastern cap.

The impulse is understandable. The history demands acknowledgment. A September 2023 report from the City Council's Legislative Policy Division, authored by Director David Whitaker, documented the scale of what was lost: across Detroit's urban renewal programs, 43,000 people were displaced, 70 percent of them Black. In the specific Black Bottom clearance zone, 7,897 people lost their homes. Ninety-two percent were renters who received no compensation. An estimated 300 or more Black-owned businesses were eliminated. The handout distributed to every attendee tonight—an overlay of the

highway network atop the destroyed neighborhoods, their names printed in white over blue shadows—made the causal argument visually: highways erased communities.

But the Storytelling Booth is gathering memory in a structural vacuum. The Feasibility Study Schedule displayed tonight confirmed that the Park Design and Placemaking phase has not yet begun—it is projected to start in March or April 2026. There is no design framework to receive the stories being collected. Community memory is being harvested as raw material before the structure that will process it exists. And when that structure materializes, the engineering scenario will already be locked in.

The deeper contradiction is spatial. The same eastern cap that would honor Black Bottom also functions as the primary pedestrian gateway for Brush Park's luxury housing corridor. Tonight's rendering labeled the eastern cap a "Neighborhood Gathering Space" while labeling the central cap a "Vibrant Hub within the Entertainment District." The hierarchy is embedded in the naming: entertainment gets the vibrant hub; the community gets the gathering space. We are witnessing the architecture of a commemorative amenity—one in which storytelling booths and historical markers for displaced Black communities become placemaking features that increase the experiential value of an adjacent high-end residential corridor.

The institutional absence compounds the moral one. Detroit's Reparations Task Force submitted its 558-page final report to City Council at the end of October 2025—a document that explicitly traces its mandate to the "urban renewal programs that eradicated Black Bottom and Paradise Valley." The report recommends a $100,000 grant program for businesses displaced by urban renewal and calls for Environmental Reparations Zones. Yet no formal connection exists between the task force's work and the I-75 Cap's design process. No concrete mechanism has been proposed to identify, locate, or directly benefit the descendants of displaced communities. "Descendants of Black Bottom" appears in nearly every policy document surrounding both the I-75 Cap and the adjacent I-375 project. It has not yet appeared in a binding agreement.

The project team is deploying 1935 HOLC redlining maps in their presentation—extending the causal chain from federal housing discrimination to highway construction to present-day severance. They are handing attendees the wound. But the treatment on offer is art markers and memory collection. If you distribute a map of systemic destruction, it is reasonable to be asked about systemic remedy.

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III. The Institutional Vacuum: Six Questions and Their Silences

The atmosphere in tonight's meeting was defined by what Peter Frase might recognize as the social architecture of Rentism: a warm, professionally managed engagement environment in which consequential questions are absorbed rather than answered. DDP CEO Eric Larson arrived midway through the event. He did not participate in the technical presentation or the question-and-answer session; instead, he circulated among presenters and stakeholders, posing for photographs. It was a visual enactment of the project's governance: the CEO moves through the room while the engineer addresses the public.

The DDP is a 501(c)(3) business-membership nonprofit founded in 1922, governed by a board that includes Christopher Ilitch. In 2022, DDP established a subsidiary—the Detroit Partnership for Innovation—to serve as fiduciary for the Detroit Center for Innovation, receiving a $100 million donation from Stephen Ross's foundation and land contributions from the Ilitch organization. The organization leading this "public reconnection" project is structurally intertwined with the private developers who stand to benefit most from its completion.

Six questions, posed during the evening's engagement, exposed the distance between the project's public narrative and its structural reality:

On developer influence: Has the cap design been informed by development-specific requirements from adjacent property owners? The response was that the design is "independent." But independence is a strange word for a project whose central cap is labeled a hub within the entertainment district, whose flanking hotels cannot achieve luxury pricing without it, and whose developer advisory representatives sit on the stakeholder group guiding the design.

On land governance: MDOT will own the four to five acres of new real estate created atop the caps—the most commercially valuable corridor in Detroit. Will a community land trust have a seat at the table? The answer: governance remains "to be determined." This is the most consequential unanswered question in the project. The difference between a publicly managed commons and a privately operated maintenance district funded by adjacent property owners will determine whether the cap serves the neighborhood or the portfolio.

On fiscal sustainability: With federal grants at risk and the One Big Beautiful Bill Act having rescinded $2.4 billion in the program that helped fund this study, who pays for long-term operations and maintenance? The capital and operating cost analysis is scheduled for a future phase—conveniently deferred past the point where engineering commitments become irreversible.

On descendant benefit mechanisms: Will the project adopt the Detroit Reparations Task Force's material recommendations—grant programs, Environmental Reparations Zones—for the families displaced by this highway? The response retreated into storytelling. Memory is important. It is not a benefit mechanism.

On the funding deficit: MDOT requested $5 million from the Reconnecting Communities program and received $2 million. How will the project close the $3 million gap, and were the contingent state and local matching grants released given the shortfall? The answer was procedural—future funding rounds would be pursued. No specific strategy was articulated.

On the I-375 seam: The presentation explicitly described the I-375 boulevard project as "separate." But the I-75/I-375 interchange—deferred five to ten years when MDOT scaled I-375 back in November 2025—is the physical connection point for the eastern cap. How does one design a cap adjacent to an interchange that will not be resolved for a decade? This question was met with the observation that the projects are being "coordinated"—a word that does not survive contact with the geography.

These silences are not oversights. They are the operating architecture of a project that has successfully separated its technical feasibility from its political accountability. The engineering is real. The governance is vapor.

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IV. Why Cap I-75 and Remove I-375?

There is a final, structural question that frames all others. Two highways—I-75 and I-375—were built through the same neighborhoods, destroyed the same communities, and are now the subjects of adjacent federal "Reconnecting Communities" initiatives. One is being capped. The other was being removed. The comparative logic has never been critically examined.

The answer is traffic volume. I-75 carries 97,200 vehicles per day through the study area—largely suburban commuters. It is politically untouchable. I-375 carried far less. So the cap preserves I-75's capacity while the boulevard conversion eliminates I-375's. This is a choice about whose mobility is prioritized. Suburban commuter throughput on I-75 is sacrosanct; the urban boulevard replacing I-375 is an acceptable sacrifice. The choice has been made without being named—and the Reconnecting Communities framing obscures the fact that the communities being "reconnected" are being reconnected over an untouched highway, not in place of one.

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Conclusion: The Parks Are Not the Product

The I-75 Cap is a feasible project. It has navigated the transition from vision to technical reality with competent engineering and strategic design. By selecting segmented caps that avoid the tunnel-ventilation threshold, the project team has circumvented the most prohibitive cost barrier. The alignment of federal policy, state commitment, and massive private investment in the immediate vicinity is rare and genuine. None of this is in dispute.

But feasibility is not the same as justice, and the renderings are not the reality. The renderings show green parks and pedestrian promenades. The spreadsheets show a ratio—$400,000 in private developer contributions against $200 million in public construction costs—that suggests the parks are not the product but the packaging. The product is the transformation of a highway trench into an amenity corridor that completes the value proposition of the most heavily subsidized private development in Detroit's modern history.

In Dallas, Klyde Warren Park generated over $660 million in incremental tax revenue and tripled surrounding property values in a decade. In Detroit, the beneficiaries of that same mechanism already have names: Olympia Development, Related Companies, and the District Detroit portfolio. They have contributed one five-hundredth of the project's cost. They sit on the advisory group shaping its design. And the first building adjacent to the caps has already shed its affordable housing commitment before its foundation is poured.

Tonight, as leadership circulated for photographs and representatives met governance questions with practiced deflection, the real stitch was being sewn—not between

neighborhoods, but between public capital and private returns. For the residents of Detroit, the challenge is to assert control over the seam before the engineering becomes irreversible and the governance defaults to the interests already seated at the table. The Feasibility Study Schedule on the screen tonight showed the timeline clearly: the cost analysis, the funding strategy, and the final report all arrive in summer 2026. The window is narrowing. The questions that were absorbed tonight will need to be answered before it closes.