

Environmental Activism Oral History Project
Detroit, MI

Margaret Weber

Interviewed by
Mike Lake
November 28, 2018
Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Information Sciences
Kim Schroeder, Instructor
Fall 2018

Margaret Weber was born in Tiffin, Ohio. She has lived her adult life in the Rosedale Neighborhood of Detroit, Michigan, where she became an environmental activist in the city. Mrs. Weber was instrumental in bringing the first curbside recycling program to Detroit. This activism was tied to her objections to the Detroit incinerator.

The interviewer is Mike Lake, a student at Wayne State University.

Abstract:

This oral history with Margaret Weber concentrates on her environmental activism in the city of Detroit, Michigan. Mrs. Weber is the convener of Zero Waste Detroit and the coordinator of Rosedale Recycles. Mrs. Weber describes her early success in having one of the first regional drop off recycling centers in the city. Moreover, she was instrumental in bringing curbside recycling to the city for the first time. She describes her struggles and successes with the city. Additionally, prominent in the conversation is the Detroit incinerator, the largest municipal trash incinerator in the United States and how the politics surrounding the incinerator affected her efforts toward recycling.

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Walter P. Reuther Library
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Transcript of interview conducted November 28, 2018 with:
Margaret Weber of Detroit, Michigan
By: Mike Lake

Lake: Mike Lake

Weber: Margaret Weber

[Transcription starts at 0:12]

Lake: To start off with a formality. This is an oral history interview with Margaret Weber of Detroit, Michigan on November 28, 2018 and in Detroit, Michigan. Margaret Weber is the convener of Zero Waste Detroit and the coordinator of Rosedale Recycles. So, mostly I wanted to talk to you about your environmental activism in the city of Detroit. But just for biographical purposes, it's usually customary to start with a little biographical information such as where you were born.

Weber: Sure, I was born in Tiffin, Ohio. My father was an organic gardener so I think that is sort of the roots of my interests environmental recycling or that kind of thing. So, as kids we sort of knew what our summer entertainment would be—it would be working in the garden and we also ate seasonally so if it was spring we ate rhubarb for dessert or if it was August or July we ate corn as our vegetables and so we were very much in tune with what was seasonal. And back in that day which is a long time ago there weren't as many—the availability of spring vegetables year around wasn't something that was real. If we had asparagus in our garden it was something we ate that was seasonal. The thing that gave me a background or a sense of how we as humans are very much connected to the earth and what happens on the earth. So, that's just a little bit of background. And my dad was actually, I didn't learn this until later, he was actually an advocate of recycling in our home town. I wasn't aware of it at that time. It was many years after that I learned of the engagements that he had at the local level in that small town.

So, fast forwarding into adulthood, I married someone who was very interested in nature, he was a bird watcher, also a professor of ethics and even when we were first married we were looking for places to recycle so when we first moved to Detroit we had to go to Southfield or find other places to recycle.

[2:55]

So, then in the '80s, there was a citizen referendum about the city taking on the debt to build the incinerator, and there were a lot of folks very active. It was the he Evergreen Alliance, I was not involved with that, I wasn't really, really, tuned into that deeply and I think it would be fair to say I didn't appreciate the enormous implications of that decision. I ended up paying some attention to it, but I learned in the subsequent twenty-five, thirty years how important that kind of decision is. That public bond was approved in a referendum and then the city built the incinerator. And in late 1989, I was on the board of our local neighborhood association and our board president asked the question, "Who would like to do something for recycling, or to offer recycling here in the city. And I just sort of raised my hand or called him back on that day and he said, Good, would you do something about it?" And so, I guess I put out a feeler and about twelve people in the neighborhood responded and we met here on a Saturday morning in January of 1990 and in April, which was just three months later, we started Rosedale Recycles which was a

once the month drop off center for people to bring their recycling to the parking lot of Christ the King church out here in Northwest Detroit on Grand River Avenue. It was a wonderful location because there is a large parking lot and there is a great flow of traffic from one street to the next.

[4:58]

So, it was just ideal, and the only restriction they had is that we wouldn't leave any residual garbage and we couldn't expect that if someone brought in things to recycle but they weren't really recyclable, and it was garbage, we couldn't expect them to use Christ the King's refuse containers. Everything had to be as is when we were done with our operation every day. So, for twenty, almost twenty-five years on the third Saturday of each month from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Rosedale Recycles was at the parking lot of Christ the King and I used to say when I was out giving little speeches that if it was a hundred degrees or zero degrees you could bet your entire retirement we would be there. That was how reliable and consistent we were. And we knew that consistency and reliability was really important for people to participate.

And our experience also was that the people willing to do this take the extra effort to recycle at home, keep it for a month and bring it to the drop off center. Across the spectrum, it wasn't just traditional environmentalists. It was young people, it was old people, it was white people, it was black people, it was poor people, it was people with means. And the longer we operated the more we were reflective of the actual neighborhood. I think when we first started it was probably more traditional environmentalists who were glad to see something was happening, and at the time that we started, there was only a drop off center on the east side, there was one in Midtown, and there was ours. And then the city had one down by the incinerator, which actually didn't function too many years after that. I'm not sure when they quit.

But it wasn't too long before we were the only one that continued. We were originally supported by Rosedale Park Improvement Association, that's a neighborhood association. They gave us a few hundred dollars to start. We actually never fully utilized that at the time that we started there was some revenue from the recyclables that we collected. So much so that we actually accrued some money and then when the market fell and the paper market was really, really, bad and the only way we could collect newspaper was to pay the recycler twenty dollars a ton. Then we could draw down on what we had accrued. And the reason we continued to collect that newspaper even though it cost us was because we knew that newspapers were some of the first things that people recycled.

[8:12]

That was traditional with Boy Scout paper drives or whatever. If you were talking to someone who was not a recycler the first thing they would probably think of was newspapers. So, if we stopped recycling newspapers, our concern would be that it would be a deterrent and it would get people out of the habit. So, we weathered that dip in the market. It lasted about a year or so that we had to pay the recycler for paper. And we weathered it and then in early—shortly after 2000 we realized that we really needed to become our own 501(c)(3) so that we could do some fundraising, get some support for the community. Never was it required that anyone be a contributor but we did ask for donations at the gate and the response was really very positive. Positive enough that it allowed us to continue all the way until 2014, it was our last monthly drop off.

[9:38]

And we stopped in 2014 because at that time in July of 2014 the city made curbside recycling available to anyone in the city and we can talk about the parameters around that. But we as Rosedale Recycles always had the long-term goal to have recycling available

to everybody in the city and for it to be curbside and for it to be really intensive recycling. So, in order to help push that we thought it was the right time to stop having the drop off center which was monthly and what we actually do now is provide events of paper shredding which we do about twice a year.

[10:23]

But to get to the real, to connect it to the incinerator building, early in our time of operating Rosedale Recycles was starting to advocate to the city about how we could have curbside or how could start have a pilot, et cetera, et cetera. And we didn't get any positive response. I can remember one meeting with DPW [Department of Public Works] director, and the response was that we were presenting the argument that recycling actually creates more jobs and more economic activity than incineration and disposal and the response was, "my job isn't to create jobs, my job is to pick up the garbage."

So, we also began to appreciate that by our advocacy and beginning to approach city leaders—two really important things, at least from my experience. One was that the dialogue in the building of the incinerator was framed very effectively by the proponents of the incinerator, which included the mayor [Coleman Young] as a dispute between a black urban mayor and white suburban and traditional environmentalists. Partially that was true but it wasn't completely true.

[12:22]

And that the residuals of that, I would say in my experiences, many, many, years later is that if you started to talk about recycling in the city sometimes the reaction is, "how could you talk about recycling when you have a city which has a high unemployment rate, a high illiteracy rate, a high poverty rate, people's concerns are not about whether or not you want to recycle. People's concerns are jobs and crime."

And, also sometimes the reaction that I experienced as a white woman that if I started to talk about it, there would be some of the assumption that I don't live in the city, that I was a _____ (??) so there was that sort of reality around the discussion and about talking about this issue in the city. The other thing which is really important, and this isn't just my experience, but it's a reality. The decision to build an incinerator and commit to the financials to do that had a tremendous impact on a city's budget.

[13:36]

So, in the mid-eighties when the citizens were making this decision about approving a debt bond for twenty years for the incinerator, I would suggest that the vast majority of the voters on it weren't apprised or didn't have the opportunity to really think, we are in a situation, the city of Detroit, of a declining tax base, a declining population, a declining tax base—the city's aging in infrastructure and you take on a twenty-year financial burden. That's a commitment, that's it, and that commitment strains the financial resources but it also precludes any other kind of decision about how to handle your refuse.

So, eventually as Zero Waste Detroit was ramping up its advocacy about the impact of the incinerator, toward the end—because of our declining numbers and the declining amount of trash that went into the incinerator from Detroit, if you did the math about what we were actually paying for the debt and divided it by the tonnage and in a couple of years we paid a \$150 or \$170 per ton to burn our stuff in the incinerator. It's a situation called put or pay. So, you're kind of strangle-held.

And there are other cases in the nation. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania was in a similar situation in terms of the financial impact and one of our members actually calculated that

the financial impact of the incinerator if you include the interest from the twenty-year bond was \$1.2 billion, that's a lot of money. So, it just precluded any opportunities.

[15:57]

So, that was part of it as we became willing to understand some of that stranglehold. Rosedale Recycles sort of just decided, okay, we're not going to waste our time or use our time advocating for an alternative for a while, we're going to bide our time. We're going to continue to do this, we're going to have this drop off center. I used to use the phrase, "that we're like holding a candle." That this is an indicator that Detroiters are interested in recycling, that they're willing to take this extra effort to do this.

And then, around 2006, there was beginning to be conversation about what do we do with the debts over—2009 was the end of the public debt—and what would be the opportunity and the options. So, Joann, councilwoman Joann Watson, had an environmental justice taskforce on city council and I think she was the one who sort of started the conversation, "What are we going to do about the incinerator?"

Long story short, I wanted to be sure that Rosedale Recycles and that we were in this conversation since we had been involved for so long, and so I think what I did, is I invited people from a variety of organizations and my goal personally was that whatever group would be lifting-up this issue, would be diverse and that we would attempt to have a different dynamic so that it wouldn't be, "oh, these are the white environmentalists against a black city."

[18:02]

So, we had, and we still do, we had the Michigan Environmental Council. We had EMEAC, East Michigan Environment Action Coalition; Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice; Sierra Club for Environmental Justice; Ecology Center, and we have a variety of other groups,

So, we started to meet here, I think initially we had only about eight of us, eight groups, and what we did is we wrote a report for city council, and it was just an eight-page report talking about the impact of the incineration or what the alternatives could be. So, that got presented to council. And then, we also were wanting to frame the issue in terms of the economic opportunity that the waste stream really has value. These are commodities, this isn't just junk. And initially our name was a Coalition for a New Business Model for Solid Waste in Detroit. And we actually used that entire title for our coalition for a couple of years, until one of our members said that, "you know, that's a lot to spit out. We need a new title." And so, we went through a process of looking at different names, et cetera, and came up with Zero Waste Detroit.

[19:32]

And some people were a little concerned that was a little too bit aspirational because you actually never get to zero waste. But it was short and it was aspirational in the sense of certainly giving a goal and it was pretty clear what you were talking about. So, we submitted, we wrote a resolution in 2008 for city council which was passed which really was an articulation for city, that the city council supported ending incineration and doing this entire different approach to solid waste and laid out this whole thing.

And that I think was sort of a pretty clear signal that there was this notable group or notable coalition that was pushing for an alternative.

In 2009, the city had the option to purchase the incinerator, and we were down at council regularly to oppose that. We were concerned that if the city purchased it then they would

become even more committed to it.

There could be another perspective that if the city purchased it then they could have dismantled it, but there were no signals from the city government or from the Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority, which is the independent body overseeing the facility. There weren't any signals that that would have been the decision. So, we counted that as a victory.

[21:25]

So, that's kind of background and I don't know, along this path of working on the issue, I think it's very true that I initially came to this work because of probably a traditional environmental concern that you don't waste resources—that if you can capture the value and reuse them that's a very good approach.

In the course of doing this this work I came to learn and appreciate that the incinerator is an environmental injustice—i.e., it's a major polluter in the middle of a community that's low income, people of color, predominantly. And so, again in the work of the coalition. I call Zero Waste Detroit sort of a miracle coalition because we're not incorporated, we don't have any bylaws, we don't have any of that. We do have a fiduciary, the Michigan Environmental Council, which we need because we have a staff person. One person might have the skills of knowing the chemistry or about the pollutants and be able to give you a scientific rundown. Another member of the coalition might have real strong connections within a particular community or be on the watch out for whatever is going on in city government. So, there's different gifts and different strengths within the coalition which I would say has actually been an attribute for us, continuing to be a voice and a presence within the city.

[23:27]

So, in 2010, I think it's 2010, that the city started a pilot program. We were down at council in the years of '08, '09, '10, and all of those pretty consistently especially around budget time because we were also watching and talking about GDRRA [Greater Detroit Resource Recovery Authority]. And raising questions about GDRRA. We would go to their meetings, because we were concerned about whether they were going to do a bid, take it to another contract with the incinerator, et cetera, et cetera. So, our presence at city council was—it was a consistent presence. And our ask was pretty clear, so, under Mayor Cockrel, the first part of the curbside recycling program was started and that was Brightmoor, North Rosedale, and the East Side, and it was two different plants. One was carts and one was bins. And Zero Waste Detroit, and some of its members like Sierra Club and others were invited to be part of a community advisory committee, which we did. It was one of those situations where you were asked to give feedback, you were never asked to come in for the design of the program. One of the things that we had very clearly said is that any curbside program should not just be for the wealthier neighborhoods, it needed to be in a diverse set of neighborhoods. Okay, so they did that, they did Brightmoor, and they did North Rosedale.

But they never asked our opinion about, “is this a good idea?”—to have bins on one side and carts on the other. Or even the layout of the education program. We supported their education program, we participated as much as we could. It was one of those situations—it was so much of a positive step you absolutely wanted to support it—but I would say we weren't in a rubber stamping situation, but we were certainly not in a situation of original design.

And then a couple of years after that—2010—and I think it was in—it was before the contract, maybe it was in about 2012, they expanded and included all of Rosedale and Grandmont #1 And then they also put in the mid-North Woodward corridor they

...and when they also put in the new recycling contract, they expanded the curbside recycling with an additional maybe 10,000 homes.

[27:00]

LAKE: Was this still the time when people had to pay for their—?

WEBER: No, when they started the pilot program nobody had to pay, no addition to the solid waste fee, and, also when they expanded it there was no fee. When they decided to go under the new contract—excuse me—when they privatized, and this was under the Emergency Financial Manager, so, when it was real clear, when we got the news that they were going to outsource the waste hauling—the pick-up—we communicated to DPW [Department of Public Works] in writing, but we also communicated to the head of DEQ [Department of Environmental Quality] and to the state about what we thought were best practices for that contract. And so, we were advocating for a universal rollout. And that it be carts, that everyone would get a cart.

I think that had some impact because the contract said that, “recycling should be available to everybody, that the haulers had to collect recycling.” What originally was the story was that everybody had to pay \$25 and we met with DPW and said that was—and the rationale from the DPW perspective is that if you just give them out, there’s a lot of contamination. People just use them for an additional trash cart.

Well, part of our answer to that was, well, indeed, but people need lots of consistent messaging because what you’re actually doing is you’re presenting people who haven’t recycled, you’re presenting people with actually a new habit and a new opportunity, but just like if I’ve always been a Coke drinker and you’re convincing me that it would be much better if I drank water. If you just tell me that once, I’m probably not going to make a shift from Coke to water. I need multiple messages and varied messages.

When the city did its rollout, there was minimal, there was supposed to be, and in most cases there was, education in a little bag that came with the cart. But that education, at least when we got ours, was inside the cart. So, again, if you’re not someone who’s into the issue, and you get this cart, and it’s there—now in our community we certainly tried to spread the word, but, minimal, *de minimus*.

[30:13]

And not many billboards, very little PSAs [Public Service Announcements], et cetera, et cetera. That being one of the reasons, because of the contamination, the head of DPW did not want everybody to get it, he wanted some buy in from the purchase—from the resident. So, we did succeed in convincing, if I have to call for my cart, that’s already an indication that I’m buying in somewhat. And then you’re asking me to pay \$25 besides? That’s like a double extra whammy. And so, we convinced them that if they did some education they could get it for free, and that’s how it came to be that Zero Waste Detroit and Green Living Science were contracted with the city to do workshops et cetera, et cetera. And then we succeeded so much so that on the city’s website now is a little game. You can that that and you can get the cart. And those things have been successes because of our persistence and our advocacy.

That being said—there are still people in this city who think that recycling hasn’t come to their neighborhood. Probably because in their experience in their own neighborhood there isn’t very much recycling or it hasn’t—

Zero Waste Detroit’s staff person, our current outreach coordinator, Galen Hardy, is excellent at getting out on the street in his experience. He will walk in a neighborhood; he’ll cover a certain number of blocks. He’ll flyer, and he’ll literally stand on the street corner. And his experience is that a lot of people in the city don’t go beyond their

corner. And his experience is that a lot of people in the city don't go beyond their neighborhoods. They aren't connected to the central city, and they get very little information. Because, if you're not into the network, there isn't much on radio or on television. There isn't much messaging, there's not much varied messaging, multi-faceted messaging. And very, very few mailers that go to people. There have been, over the years—one time there was a mailer in with your water bill. Well I would say that for most people, when you get your water bill, you look at your water bill (laughter). That's what you look at, and then you pay it. The rationale was that everybody gets a water bill. Actually, there in the process of preparing a mailing, we were just reviewing something last night. But it's been a long slog to convince leadership of the importance of that investment.

In 2014, in the fall, about eleven or so people went on a delegation. This was organized by Councilman [Scott] Benson. I didn't go because I wanted to make sure other people had the opportunity. Two people from Zero Waste Detroit, someone from Green Living Science, Councilman Benson, the head of DPW, the head of the Water Authority, Brenda Jones, the head of Council, Guy Williams from DWEJ [Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice], they went out to San Francisco to tour their recycling ecology. Which has sort of been a premier recycling municipal operation. They learned, in the course of that, that even though that program is long-standing in the community and very successful, they invest every year in their education in the tune of more than a million dollars. And the standard for recycling education programs, is you should calculate one dollar for every participant, every year, and if you're making a change, you should calculate three dollars for that year for every resident. Point being, you don't educate on the cheap about how to do this right. And that message has been a really, really, hard sale in this city.

[35:19]

I can't speak to whether or not it's because, I don't think it's malicious, I don't know what it is. I do think that there are some people in city government who have a disdain for residents who do not have as much means—I do believe that. I do think there's some—I think it's racism, I think it's racism and classism. The assumption that people of fewer means and people of color of fewer means, don't care. And one of the things that we were emphasizing, again, getting back to the incinerator, is recycling isn't just a typical environmental issue. Recycling is about improving your quality of life and it's about your kids and your grandkids. And we would maintain that anybody, everybody cares about their grandkids.

[36:33]

If I don't have job, of course, my first concern is I need to get a job, absolutely. So, if you offer me a service, you make it easy for me to do what's best for my kids in the long-term. You make it easy for me, you give me the service. You help me and you give me the information so I can make that choice. But you don't assume that I don't care, just because I can't go to a meeting about recycling. You're absolutely right, I'm not going to go to a meeting about recycling because I am looking for a job or I am working really hard to live on the resources that I have. But if you give me the information, and you tell me how to do this, and you explain to me why, chances are I'm going to do it.

LAKE: How do you get that message out, primarily?

WEBER: (Laughter) You mean how do I get the message of what I just said? My critique? Or how do you get the message?—Leadership. So—increasingly, I frequently use the example of Angel's Night. Back in the '80s, yeah, it was in the '80s, the early '80s, Devil's Night was the night before [Halloween]. And in this city, the arson rate was very high, the night before Halloween. So much so that it got to be a national and international piece of news. How many fires are there going to be in Detroit on October

international piece of news. How many fires are there going to be in Detroit on October 30th? So, it was Mayor Young who said “We’re going to turn this around.” And he said, “It’s not going to be Devil’s Night anymore, it’s going to be Angel’s Night.” And so, October 29th and October 30th became the nights for the community to get out, do community radio patrol, and there is no way, that if you lived in this city and you didn’t know it was Angel’s Night. There were people in every neighborhood, there were volunteers who would be out. People would be driving around with the little bubble. City workers would be driving around with the little bubbles. Community policing and reporting. That happened because the city invested the resources in it. People who worked for the administration would be relating to the community, there were neighborhood city halls, those people helped to get out the word, get the volunteers for Angel’s Night.

Same thing for Motor City Makeover which happens every spring, and it’s a time for giving some resources to the community to do cleanups, there will be a bin if you’re going to clean up over at the park on whatever that weekend is in May, or depending on where in the city you are, your day might be the second Saturday in May and yours might be the third Saturday in May. There’s going to be bags, there is going to be this, get your volunteers, tell us what your site is, we’ll have your bin there, all of that stuff.

[39:55]

Resources are how you get information out. It takes some resources. Whether it’s a staffing person, the radio blitzes, the emails, whatever. To this day, we haven’t yet had that same blast, that same intensity of messaging—about the city needs, the city is getting serious about waste reduction and recycling.

Now, if you were interviewing the head of DPW and asking him that question, he would say, “Well we are getting serious, we’ve had three years, we’ve applied to grants to the state, and we’ve gotten grants for additional carts, and that’s how we can hire Zero Waste Detroit and Green Living Science to do the outreach.” That’s true, but it’s just, the city is redoing its website, and as I said about a year ago the city did a great improvement about how you get a text messaging reminder about when your collection is, and you can have this quiz online and you can get your cart. They just redid the website, and on the first part, about get your schedule, the first word is “wait,” there’s nothing that is recycling first. Hear what I’m saying?

So, if I didn’t know about recycling, and I see this online, I click and get my waste [bin], there’s nothing that kind of showcases for me that the city’s recycling. It’s multifaceted types of things. The city is now redoing the buses, so it’s not the same. We were saying two years ago that the city could use the buses to advertise about recycling. Long story short, we’re still working on it. And we succeeded, right before Thanksgiving, we had a

I’ll back up a little bit. In the summer, Zero Waste Detroit and Green Living Science requested to meet with the DPW director. Sort of a lobbying meeting, just urging him to be aspirational. We viewed everything that’s gone on so far and encouraging him to set goals, long-term goals, like x rate of recycling or x waste reduction, because even with the recycling having been in place since beginning of the pilot in 2010, our waste deferral from disposal is only at four percent and that counts the yard waste. And that’s just municipal and residential. So, we had lots and lots of opportunity.

[43:14]

And Zero Waste Detroit’s position particularly, we’re opposed to incineration, but we’re very, very, mindful that if we only talk about incineration and we don’t talk about the alternative—we don’t talk about changing people’s habits, then we might be guilty of

what we experienced. People bring their, municipalities bring their trash and burn it in the city. We're not saying, "Don't burn here, just dump it in somebody else's neighborhood." That's not what we're proposing. We're saying, "Let's look at that waste stream differently. Let's look at the resources. Let's get serious about claiming those resources." And if we really get serious about claiming those resources, then it would be a bed of economic activity. And that's really our goal.

But the truth is, you and I can sit here and we can recycle ninety-eight percent of what we do, but if it's just Mike and Margaret who are doing it, that's not enough to generate the economic activity. It has to be intensive, it has to be comprehensive. It needs to be residential, it needs to be business, it needs to be apartment buildings. It needs to be a mindset. That this is what we are doing.

And the other piece is the solid waste issue, and what we do with our solid waste is a big piece related to climate—greenhouse gasses. The understanding is that it could be as much as twenty percent of greenhouse gasses of how we dispose, especially if you include food. The city needs to get rolling on being public and getting commitments about greenhouse gas reduction. The UN [United Nations] report this summer, or early fall, whenever it was that basically said that 2040 is the date and if we don't get our shit in gear, excuse me, but if we don't get our plan in gear by 2030, the reverse doesn't work.

So, we took the content of what we presented to Mr. Brundidge [Ron Brundidge, director of DPW] and then we also communicated it to the mayor, but we thought, okay, let's do a resolution for council to look at. So, we basically took that same message—didn't reinvent it—wrote a resolution for council and the resolve is that the council supports a plan for waste reduction and recycling goals and benchmarks and ten percent by 2020, and forget what by what, and then I think it was forty percent by 2040, I don't have all that memorized. That got approved in committee, the public health and safety committee on November—the day before election, November 5?

LAKE: November 6 was the [Midterm 2018] election.

WEBER: And then it got approved by all of council on November 7. It was 7-0, two people weren't present. And that resolution says that the plan should be, the plan should be done by April 19. So, yesterday some of us were working on creating a plan. Kind of using the initiative, like if you're going into a meeting and nobody has given you an agenda, if you go in with a draft agenda, you've helped to craft how the meeting's going to go. That is just real. So, taking the initiative, knowing that if we draft a plan or whatever in the process things are going to change, but at least you get the goal going. And there's been a climate change ordinance, that's kind of been, in the works, that is, we just learned yesterday, the administration's response to it was not a strengthening one.

[47:46]

So, this administration, and when I say this administration, I mean the top—hasn't yet demonstrated the urgency.

LAKE: The city administration?

WEBER: The city, no, the city—well, the national—

LAKE: Yeah.

WEBER: I mean, the report came out of the administration, thank the Lord. But we know what the top man is trying to do with it. However, the report came out. So, all of those agencies in the US government that came out to talk about the dire economic consequences, not just environmental consequences but economic consequences from

climate change. So, to get back to your question about what is needed. Citizens can do a lot, and we have. And not just Zero Waste Detroit but working with many partners we continue to look on how to push these agendas so Zero Waste Detroit is part of the Detroit Environmental Agenda which advocated for the city of Detroit to do an office of sustainability.

Detroit, as a city, is playing catch up on this sustainability stuff. I'm not talking about the people, I'm talking about administratively. Many cities across the country, major cities, we're the last major city to have a comprehensive, citywide recycling program. And I would say to you it's because we had the incinerator and that was the easy disposal, and many people still committed to that way of thinking are still in powerful ways, in powerful positions.

That's what we do, we're creating—and they bought the Kool-Aid that this is waste to energy. Well, yes, there's some energy there, but it's not all clean and I haven't even talked about the facility and what kind of an actor they are.

[49:58]

LAKE: When you said “Kool-Aid,” is that a Jim Jones reference?

WEBER: (Laughter), It's just a phrase like, I get it, yeah, I guess it's a Jim Jones thing. But they don't get it yet. They haven't drunk the same thing that the rest of us have.

LAKE: I understand, yes.

WEBER: So, the city is the last to really get it, all types of people talk about young people who move, or you run into young people who have moved to the city, and they're surprised that's there's not recycling in the dorm, or that there's not recycling in the apartment, or that the city's just starting recycling.

The city yet, as, and I'm talking about mayors—don't yet talk about this as a challenge for us as a city. Yes, we have other challenges. I mean, when the current mayor, when he took the position, his main emphasis was about repopulating the city. I'm not disagreeing that having a strong tax base, and having a solid population base is important. Very important, but if you're looking as a city for generations then the reality is you need to be looking at these global forces which are impacting us locally even if we want to think that they are not, because they are.

[51:47]

LAKE: I think that's the great challenge, is to get people to look forward. As you were mentioning, that everyone cares about their grandchildren, but you have to educate them. Has there been any city-wide education, say at the elementary or the high school level to teach Detroit children about recycling?

WEBER: Green Living Science does that. When we were first doing the outreach thing, they were particularly focusing on schools, and they've done a lot in schools. And I have, so yes, there's that. And I understand and appreciate the importance of education on the lower level. I think that's very, very, important.

You also have to create a system which reinforces what you're teaching. So, here's an example of right now, we have, everybody pays the same waste fee, okay. Which is unfortunate because, originally, and this changed under [Mayor] Kilpatrick, and I do not understand the rationale, but it used to be that you paid your waste fee, it was related to value of your property, it was related to your taxes.

So, if I lived in a mansion and you lived in a little two-bedroom house, you were going to pay less for waste—it just was the way it was. It got changed to a flat fee. It was a heavily debated thing and we opposed that but it passed. And then it got reduced. So, now the flat fee is \$240. And if you are a senior of limited income you can get that reduced. So, it's not a whole lot. Having a flat fee—this is thinking about structurally for waste—having a flat fee doesn't give any opportunity, incentivize you or me to reduce.

So, if you live in Seattle, the system is you can choose your cart, you can have the biggest cart. You're going to pay more than if you have a littler cart for waste and have a big recycling cart. So, you're incentivized to recycle. They also though, do enforcement or inspections, So, if you're here, in the city, with lack of confidence in the citizenry. It is as if, you give me a great, big recycling cart because it's cheaper and I get a smaller trash [bin] if I do this, I'm just going to stick my trash in there.

[54:51]

Well, if you don't ever come around and reinforce the message, either by education materials or by giving me a ticket if I stick the trash in the recycling, you're probably right. But correspondingly, and kind of even prior to changing and creating that system, is right now what you are supposed to have is one trash container, and if you've signed up for recycling or were in the pilot area, you have one recycling container. There are people in this city, many people, who don't understand, that those carts belong to the property.

When I move, I don't take my carts with me. And with all of the abandoned property, et cetera, et cetera. In many, many, cases you will find a house that has two or three trash containers, because they've accrued them. The city hasn't gone and collected them. Now, that's the job of the city—to go and get those. And what does that do? It helps the resident understand you don't just get unlimited garbage. I mean, you explain why you're doing it, or maybe you give them a recycling cart. There is a whole way you do this—but the city hasn't done that. And the city—this isn't just about recycling—the city has a weak track record about enforcement, about municipal ordinances. And I can appreciate and understand part of it. And I would say that some of it relates to the whole history of racism, and the reason I say that is—I'll use the example of fences.

In this neighborhood, strictly speaking, you're only supposed to only have fences that go to the back from the house. That's written in this neighborhood's code, and a lot of other neighborhoods too. Now also part of the covenant of this neighborhood is racism. If you read the original code of this neighborhood you were not allowed to sell to anyone of Ethiopian descent—translate “black.”

LAKE: Sure.

WEBER: So, you can appreciate, I can appreciate, that as leadership transitions and population transitions, I can understand that if I'm a person of color—a lot of codes, a lot of things, a lot of structures in this city had racial implications or were prejudicial. And so, I might a sense of enforcement is really out to either to control me or to give me a, I'll just say control me or give me a harder case. There's a permeation about racism as I understand it—that it's real.

[58:07]

And that mentality, maybe I shouldn't call it mentality. I think how you approach enforcement is real important. Do I approach enforcement, let's just stick with the recycling or trash out of a punitive sense or do I approach it out of a quality control approach, which is beneficial to everybody? So, if I explain to everybody in the community that we're doing recycling because we know it potentially gets us economic activity We are doing our part for our residents now but also for the future generations

...because we care about our home. We're giving you this opportunity and we understand it's a shift in habit. We're going to help you with as much information as possible. If you make a mistake we are going to give you an oops-tag. If you mistake a second time we're going to give you a second oops-tag. And if you put your trash in the recycling container the third time we're probably going to give you a ticket. It's quality control.

We're giving you lots of opportunity, we want you to change your habits. This is a service for your benefit, ultimately the air—blah-blah-blah. There's a way of selling it, rather than, you stupid jerk, you stuck—(laughter).

[59:45]

LAKE: How would they even enforce that? Because curbside, isn't it usually automated?

WEBER: Yes, it is automated. In any city, you have inspectors. And so periodically you just do an inspection.

LAKE: Okay.

WEBER: Or if I'm a driver, and someone is coming past my house and they see that—if I have the same route and I notice that this resident's recycling cart is always filled with plastic bags, I could get out and tag it or I could make note of it. There are systems. They know in their truck what their route is. They have that all in their trucks. So, it's not beyond—

LAKE: It's a challenge but not—

WEBER: It's a challenge but, would they catch everything? No. But what you do when you do your spot checks is you make it clear that the system cares. And again, it's about multi-faceted, repeated, messaging.

Maybe I said this before. Budweiser and Pepsi never assume that you are going to remember who they are. They'll never assume that the college kid remembers how to get a hold of them. They are constantly reminding, right? It's called advertising. It's called, that's how you succeed. You put your face in front of your customer. Why would we expect that if we are changing our way of handling our refuse, because it is the right thing to do and we need to, why would we think that just telling people one time is going to do it?

LAKE: My brother, he's actually a marketing professor, and there's an old saying about advertising that half of every dollar you spend is wasted, but you never know which half. So, it kind of plays in to what you're saying about how you have to constantly reiterate. They don't even know, like Budweiser or Pepsi or Coke, they don't even know that half the time which advertisements get through but they know they have to do it, in order to get through.

WEBER: Right, and we are in an age even more now, where people are getting signals all the time, right? I mean, people have their phones, and this, and this. So, they're getting all this stuff. And those different venues have to be used. We also have a digital divide in the city. Not everyone is hooked up online, and so you still need to do good old fashioned mailers or good old fashioned radio PSAs or whatever. I mean, I'm not plugged into the media that way, so I sort of don't know what people listen to, but, when the city is serious about doing outreach, it does it in a very organized way. I've mentioned Angel's Night. I've mentioned Motor City Makeover. When the city got new street lights, the mayor went out into every section of the city in the different districts. There was a meeting and he explained how this was being paid for, how the rollout was going to be.

[1:03:43]

Maybe you're not familiar with this. The city of Detroit, when Mayor Duggan was inaugurated, the city was notorious for having all kinds of dark streets and lighting being a serious problem. So, the transition for incandescent to LED [Light-Emitting Diode] lights was citywide and he explained by going out into the community the rollout. He explained how it's going to be by the main avenues and then the neighborhoods. He explained that if a block was a certain length you would get how many lights, and if a block was another length you would only get them at the corner. Now, there could be pushback, et cetera, but the point is, clear, intentional outreach, across the city to explain what was going on.

That also has happened to some extent with the new ordinance for rent, for landlords. That the city was going to crack down, finally, on delinquent landlords who weren't keeping up to code or whatever, weren't abiding by ordinances. So, that you as a renter, could know if your landlord wasn't up to code, and you could withhold your rent until they met standards. Which is real, real, important because our city now, it used to be originally homeowners predominantly, but now we're—that has flipped. And so, enforcing landlord standards is really, really, important. That's being rolled out, section by section across the city. And there are signs around, so that if, okay, you live here and you rent, this is now applicable.

Intentional messaging. Thus far [laughter], we haven't sort of reached that. Now, it will be really interesting. The city has an office of sustainability and a director, and the city has engaged with an engagement team across different sectors of the community to craft a sustainability action plan, and I was just in a meeting yesterday where we were talking about the importance when this process ends, it is critically important that the mayor get there and be out there when this is rolled out. So, that it is clear to the city residents that the mayor endorses this and supports this and is behind it and it's not just, quote, the Office of Sustainability. You hear what I'm saying?

[1:06:50]

The reason for saying that is because frequently the issues of sustainability are environmental justice or recycling have been perceived as either being just the esoteric environmental, or the grassroots, and it doesn't have anything to do with the big high rollers who get a lot of attention in the city. The ones who invest and buy a lot of buildings. Whether it's the Ilitches or the Gilberts or Bedrock or whatever, or Ford, who get tax abatements, and tax relief, as a future of the city. Well, there's no question or not about whether the mayor is real supportive of this. So, some of us have the understanding that if we don't look at the issues of air quality and water quality and land use and green space, there probably isn't going to be much long-term future for the city anyway. The city is gritty. The city is determined. As you know, historically, the city was what? Detroit was the arsenal of the world.

LAKE: The arsenal of democracy, yeah.

WEBER: Yeah, and I have no doubt that the city could commit itself to being truly sustainable and sort of reinvent itself in that way. I don't have any doubt about the innovation—the capacity of real people in this city. There is just about any kind of movement you want in this city. Anything you want to hook up with, whether it's on the cultural level, or the diversity level, or the social demographic level. It's here.

LAKE: The city has a very rich history. It certainly does.

WEBER: And it's got a rich population. So, I live in hope [laughter].

[1:09:16]

LAKE: I think that's all any of us can—well—no, I was going to say that's all any of us can do, but there is obviously a lot more you can do. I'm not speaking of you personally.

WEBER: Right, and I think you look for—any change takes a long time, it takes a long time on the personal level and it takes a long time on an institutional level and certainly for a municipality. If it's something extremely dramatic then things can happen faster, and I think that's the part about—maybe the opportunity—Galen and I try to work on the word opportunity instead of using a negative. Maybe the opportunity of using some of these natural events such as the California fire, is that it highlights how powerful the forces of nature are, when they get going, and that—it's very difficult to contain them. Or that we might realize we might need to contain them and that it might be a little bit late. We just need—it's an alert.

LAKE: I agree, I think people often think of themselves as masters of the universe, when um, yeah—I'll take your expression that you agree? That we're not, that we have control but, no, even that's kind of wrong to say, we can influence, but ultimately we don't have control.

WEBER: And that I think is a key thing, and that's a really wonderful statement, because I think that mentality of humans being in control or that we're in control of the universe has been at the center of many debacles historically. And I think it's—I don't know if you ever look at the *New York Times*, and I haven't read this whole article. But this week, in the science section, there's an article on the apocalypse of the insect world. And I'm pretty sure, and I haven't read it, but from what I already know about ecology is it's going to point out about how essential insects are to our whole system. Essential, and I think, I know one of the big things I've learned from being in a marriage of fifty years with Leonard is the appreciation of how things intersect.

So, yes, true, I don't want centipedes in my house, and I'll take care of the centipedes in my house. But if we eradicate all of the centipedes in the world, you're going to flip something else out of balance, which is going to flip something else out of balance. Well, maybe I'll think that I don't care. But, as people increasingly live within the food system, if you get rid of pollinators, if you impact the bees, you're not just impacting something that's stinging you, you're impacting the ability of the almonds to produce. The almond trees, or, that's appreciation for the interconnectedness of earth.

[1:13:31]

And I have a colleague, Gloria Rivera, and she's director of Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit, and she's frequently in a meeting. And we were in a meeting a couple weeks ago about sustainability and she said, "I don't see anything in this language about earth, and essentially, earth is our home, and I think the more we come to appreciate that I depend on that out there—I depend on that air and that water and that soil. Because if it can't sustain me, I'm gone. I can't live without air, water, and soil."

LAKE: And there's nowhere else to go.

WEBER: Right. The truth is, there might be one or two people who go to Mars, but that's not real, that's not real. And that old expression about dirtying our nest—like what kind of creature dirties its own nest, and that is sort of what we're doing. I think that another temptation that we have as people in the United States is to make the assumption that this country is so vast, it's okay. So, it's okay if I—it doesn't make any difference what I do here—there's so much land in this country, it doesn't make any difference. But if you start to do a little bit of travel in this country. And you see that actually we have a lot of

very dry parts in this country. We have a lot of parts in this country that don't have the ability to be productive, either in food, or I already said, "water." At least when I'm out West in the more deserty-area—

I have a sister who lives in western Nebraska. It takes ten acres to sustain one cattle. That's a lot of land. So, just even understanding and appreciating that sustenance and sustaining varies. So, anyway, I think that the ability to appreciate the interconnectedness, and that, we aren't in control and how dependent we are.

[1:16:32]

That also is related to the social though. We have conversation here a lot about—so I didn't really do well in school, and I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps.

Yeah well, maybe I was just lucky that I had a brain that could do well in school. I was really lucky that I had a family that supported me. I was really lucky that I didn't fall and break my leg or break my neck. I was really lucky that I didn't get sick. All of those fortunate pieces that had nothing to do with me controlling it. I was gifted. So, I think that the sense of appreciation of interdependence is a really, really, a key thing.

And I think some of the big honchos get it on the economic sense, but I don't know if they get it on the ecology sense. I'm not sure.

LAKE: There's a certain amount of maybe, fatalism or—I think some people genuinely don't care about the planet 200 years from now.

WEBER: I think you're right. I think you're right.

LAKE: So, unfortunately that—

WEBER: The other thing is that vested interests become very strong. Now, it could be a vested interest in the sense of, okay, after twenty years, or ten years of my life I was head of GDRRA or I supported the incinerator. And so, for me to shift my perspective on the incinerator—how do I do that without losing face? Or if I'm the investor in the incinerator, well, I've invested in it because supposedly it's going to make me money and so I'm certainly—I know this from my professional work on behalf of advocacy. We never go in to dialogue with a corporation expecting them to speak negatively about their corporation. We know that. We're not going in there asking that. We might ask, we might talk about what opportunities there are for shifting—so, they're always going to phrase everything in an opportunity perspective. I mean, that's part of human nature, and it's certainly part of the business culture.

And I think of DRP, Detroit Renewable Power, which is so—the owner's change. They have new owners now. They had a new manager that only lasted about nine, ten months. And now they have another new manager. They get out there, and I would say they blow smoke to the community about all the things they're doing for odor.

Now we know, from looking at the records from the Department of Environmental Quality, Air Division, that that facility has had odor violations. More odor violations, more complaints this year than any year. The state is considering clamping down harder on them. From our perspective, they're a bad actor.

[1:20:07]

And yet, if I shift, if I shift my position totally to try to think like someone from DRP [Detroit Renewable Power]. Well, they're out there, trying to make the community think that they're an asset. And so, part of our role, Breathe Free Detroit's role, is to get out

there and be at those meetings when DRP is out in the community. And either raise questions or point out, that well, you just said this—well, maybe that's not true.

So, the vested interests is where I was. I was talking about vested interests. So, an investor who is only looking at something—only, only, only—from how much revenue is this going to get me, long-term, is going to have a very different perspective than a community person, obviously.

And now we'd be getting into business ethics and corporate culture. Sometimes you can have a situation where an individual—the individual in that corporate position—might very much care on their personal level, but when they're in the corporate position, they'll divorce their—well, many.

LAKE: It's their job to make money for stockholders. Yeah, a certain amount of selfishness can creep in and compromise personal ethics, I agree.

WEBER: So—

LAKE: Vast problems.

WEBER: Yeah, complex world [laughter]. And I guess it always will be—shades of gray. So, do you have any other questions? Is this helpful?

LAKE: This is very helpful. Yes, this was perfect.

WEBER: Good.

LAKE: Yeah. That's what I need.

WEBER: Okay.

LAKE: I appreciate the interview very much.

WEBER: You're welcome.

LAKE: So, this concludes the interview with Margaret Weber.

[Transcription ends at 1:22:26]