

The Flint Voice

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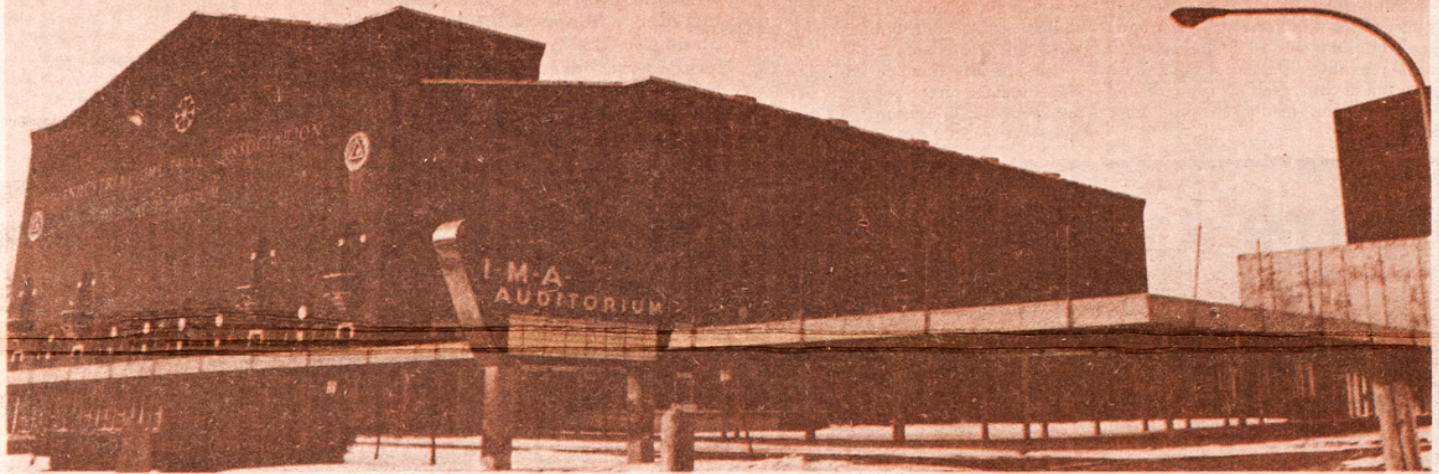
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AutoWorld

"Working on the line is no Disneyland"



The site of the IMA auditorium is slated to be transformed into a 41 million dollar amusement park called AutoWorld

By Alex Kotlowitz

It was 1969. The automobile industry was on the defensive. That year, students at San Jose State in California buried a Chevrolet to protest what they considered to be the twisted machinations and priorities of the growing automobile industry. Just three years earlier, consumer advocate Ralph Nader had published "Unsafe at Any Speed," a study which led to the eventual recall of General Motor's prize car, the Corvair.

The automobile executive felt maligned and hurt, the image of their industry tarnished.

Harding Mott, the son of C.S. Mott—the grand old gentleman protectorate of the industry—responded to the attacks. He proposed that the Mott Foundation sponsor a Hall of Fame honoring the men who created and built one of the world's largest industrial empires. He wanted it built in Flint, the birthplace of that empire.

Mott hired an architect and plans were drawn up, but nothing came of the proposal. A modified version was proposed again in the mid-1970s, but that too never made it off the drawing boards. But the idea, initially planted in 1969, was the seedling for what is now called AutoWorld.

Harding Mott's tribute to the automobile industry grew from a historical marker to a monument of grand

proportions: a theme park complete with rides and games; animated exhibits enclosed in a climate-controlled dome; a \$41 million project which, in addition to the theme park, includes a Raddison Hotel.

But there's another side to the story.

It's 1981. The automobile industry, reeling from its decision not to produce smaller, compact cars, is being crushed by the foreign competition.

The injured industry is laying off workers in droves. In Flint, Michigan unemployment remained in double figures throughout all of 1980. And robotics are replacing workers in some factories.

An unusually high cancer rate was discovered at the Fisher Body plant on Coldwater Road. General Motors is undecided whether to build a new engine plant in Vienna Township or in the city. And requests by the number one automaker for wage concessions from its workers may be forthcoming.

It is not a good year to be an auto-worker or to be living in Flint.

To help remedy the situation, Flint's city fathers have proposed the construction of AutoWorld, a huge amusement park and an attraction, they claim, which will attract hundreds of thousands—perhaps a million—tourists each year to Flint.

Some people have raised objections or have voiced reservations about the AutoWorld project. But the concerns

voiced by union members, city councilmembers and neighborhood residents have gone unnoticed in the rush to obtain federal money for the mammoth, multi-million dollar tribute to the automobile industry.

That's what this story is about: the other side.

SITTING IN the University Club dining room on the top floor of the Genesee Towers Building overlooking downtown Flint, Jim Scheaffer, president of the Flint Area Conference, Inc., scribbled something on the back of his placemat. The handwritten note described the lofty goals for AutoWorld: "a people attraction in downtown Flint centered around the automobile."

That is, an amusement park. Build an amusement park, in part with taxpayers' money, in the city with the highest jobless rate in the country. To many, it's a cruel joke.

ONE MILE north of the University Club and fifteen blocks north of the proposed AutoWorld site, Mrs. C.B. Crane, president of the Newall St. Block Club, sat at her dining room table. With the three story Buick plant and its billowing smokestacks visible from her window, Crane reacted to the plans for AutoWorld.

"It's nice to have things to bring people in as tourists," she said, "but

what about the people who live here all the time?"

"What are we going to do, build a wall so they can't see us?"

That appears to be the crux of much of the debate. Rats. Abandoned houses. Cracked sidewalks. Overgrown weeds. No parks. Garbage not picked up. Crime. Crane and her neighbors recited a litany of problems. Their attitude towards AutoWorld can best be described as benign neglect, maybe even a bit bitter.

"It's difficult to explain to people how we can find \$30 to \$40 million for projects such as AutoWorld and can't even cut the weeds on city-owned property," intones Councilmember Julius Smith, who represents Crane's neighborhood.

Scheaffer and other proponents of the AutoWorld project argue that the \$8.7 million in Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) monies is earmarked specifically for such public-private partnerships as the giant theme park, and that those dollars could not be used to rehabilitate the neighborhoods.

Scheaffer's executive assistant, Bridget Ryan—a former public relations writer for Ford Motor Co.—described the neighborhoods' concerns, such as lack of police protection and garbage collections, as "whatever their pet peeves are for the day." She went on, however, to clarify her statement by

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