

LETTER FROM MICHIGAN

DROP DEAD, DETROIT!

The suburban kingpin who is thriving off the city's decline.

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS



L. Brooks Patterson, Oakland County's chief executive, has declared, "I love sprawl."

For the past twenty-one years, L. Brooks Patterson has governed Oakland County, a large, affluent suburb of Detroit. Oakland County embodies fiscal success as much as Detroit does financial ruin, and Patterson, the county executive, tends to behave as though his chief job in life were to never let anyone forget it. One week in September, he gave me an extended tour of his empire, in a chauffeured minivan. Near the end of the first day, we headed toward Lake St. Clair, at the mouth of the Detroit River, for a party on a yacht. Patterson sat in the front passenger seat. Over his shoulder, he said, "Anytime I talk about Detroit, it will not be positive. Therefore, I'm called a Detroit basher. The truth hurts, you know? Tough shit."

The landscape slid past, a jumbled time line of American suburban innovation: big-box districts, fuel megacenters, shopping malls, restaurants with the interior acreage of a factory. "I love sprawl," Patterson once declared. "I need it. I promote it. Oakland County can't get enough of it." This credo is now memo-

rialized on Oakland County's Web site.

Patterson told me, "I used to say to my kids, 'First of all, there's no reason for you to go to Detroit. We've got restaurants out here.' They don't even have movie theatres in Detroit—not one." He went on, "I can't imagine finding something in Detroit that we don't have in spades here. Except for live sports. We don't have baseball, football. For that, fine—get in and get out. But park right next to the venue—spend the extra twenty or thirty bucks. And, before you go to Detroit, you get your gas out here. You do not, *do not*, under any circumstances, stop in Detroit at a gas station! That's just a call for a carjacking."

"That's true," his driver, a retired cop named Tim, muttered. "You're not in Kansas anymore."

Patterson just turned seventy-five. Pink-cheeked and silver-haired, he wears rimless eyeglasses and dark suits. His distinctive, slightly slurred baritone is known throughout southeastern Michigan. His sentences often start with "*Ab* my gad!"

Before becoming the county execu-

tive, Patterson, a Republican, served for sixteen years as the county prosecutor. He banned plea bargains to the extent that, as he tells it, criminals knew to avoid Oakland County, because the chief law-enforcement officer was a "crazy motherfucker" who did not make deals. He went after strip clubs and porn shops so zealously that a judge ordered him to stop "Eliot Ness-style raids." His government career has spanned the terms of seven Detroit mayors; the eighth, Mike Duggan, was inaugurated on January 1st. Patterson is known for being a shrewd tactician who has introduced creative initiatives to keep Oakland County solvent. Oakland is one of only several dozen counties in the U.S. that Standard & Poor's has given a triple-A bond rating, the highest possible credit score; Patterson maintained the distinction even during the recession, and even as Detroit's recent collapse into bankruptcy has threatened to destabilize the regional economy. In 2013, an S. & P. analyst said that, if counties were color-coded, Oakland would be platinum.

Since the 2008 Wall Street crash, Oakland County has struggled with a sluggishly rebounding housing market and a high unemployment rate, but its budget is balanced through 2017 and, as Detroit contends with eighteen billion dollars in debt, Oakland has a surplus of more than two hundred million dollars. In October, *Governing*, a nonpartisan magazine in Washington, D.C., named Patterson one of nine public officials of the year, citing his pioneering use of a three-year rolling budget, which allows the county to plan ahead for problems rather than be forced to triage them in a crisis. One of the magazine's editors told the Detroit *Free Press* that Patterson represents the kind of farsighted fiscal management that "should be a model for counties and cities and states everywhere."

Still, he is best known for his big mouth. When a black Detroit city councilwoman alleged racism during a business dispute, Patterson publicly declared that he'd "rather own a 1947 Buick than own" her. After accusing Detroit of trying to save itself by poaching Oakland County companies, he said, "I don't see how moving furniture around on the deck of the Titanic helps this region

grow." In 2012, Robert Ficano, the executive of Wayne County, which includes Detroit, became the subject of a federal investigation; when Patterson was asked what advice he'd give Ficano, he joked, "Go in the garage, pull the door down, leave the engine running." Patterson once compared road reforms to rape. He marked the death of Coleman Young—Detroit's first black mayor and a former nemesis—by calling him singly responsible for the city's demise. This past fall, during a political talk show, Patterson obliquely compared Michigan's Speaker of the House to Hitler, then produced a black pocket comb and pressed it to his upper lip.

Once, he helped host a mock roast that featured a man in a Coleman Young mask and people speaking in what one reporter called a "guttural black dialect." The Reverend Wendell Anthony, the president of the Detroit chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., complained that the media too often excused Patterson's "divisive racist antics." He added, "Mr. Patterson's failure is rooted in his limited capacity to understand that God's grace shines on more than one county and on more than one type of human being." Patterson is opposed to a regional subway system, and Brenda Lawrence—a former political rival frustrated with his refusal to compromise on this position, and with his apparent favoritism toward affluent whites—has referred to him as "an island." When I asked him how Detroit might fix its financial problems, he said, "I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, 'What we're gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn.'"

Lewis is Patterson's first name, but he likes to joke that if a pretty woman in a bar asks what the "L" in "L. Brooks Patterson" stands for, he takes her by the hand and coos, "Lonely." (Twice divorced, he is single.) En route to the yacht party, he paraphrased Edwin Edwards, who served four terms as governor of Louisiana: "I'll keep getting elected until I'm caught in bed with a live man or a dead woman."

As a young man, Patterson hoped to become a writer. For speeches, he creates his own material but also scavenges from

the Internet, bending other people's quips to fit the occasion. When Kelly Sleva, his assistant, transcribes audio recordings of notes that he makes while preparing remarks, she often hears him cracking himself up. He loves to tell a made-up story about parking some distance from a downtown venue and asking a police officer how long he'd have to walk. "I don't know—no one's ever made it," the cop answers. At a recent retirement roast of an employee who had moved to Louisville, Patterson joked, "Mike told me when he went to the Kentucky Derby he saw a bumper sticker that said 'I miss Detroit.' So he broke the window, stole the radio, and left a note that said, 'I hope this cures your homesickness.'" He recycles his bits to the point that his constituents can retell them. The first time he made the crack about Indians and corn, he was widely criticized for it, but he does not backpedal. Even if a line is poorly received, he pockets it like a shiv.

"I don't work for Detroit—they don't sign my paycheck," he told me. "The residents out here know I'm hardworking and I'm honest. Yeah, I sometimes say things that make people cringe." On another occasion, he said, "I can get away with it because me and my team, we're good at what we do. People are gonna forgive me my peccadilloes because we're the best-managed county in America."

As a native of Detroit, Patterson claims a license to criticize it. The tour he was giving me began to feel like another dig at the city. Last summer, Kevyn Orr, Detroit's emergency manager, offered to take creditors on a tour, under armed guard. The caution was warranted: four hundred and eleven people had been killed there in 2012, the worst homicide rate in two decades. "We've lost respect for life," Dave Bing, then the city's mayor, said. The police's average response time in emergencies had risen to fifty-eight minutes. The creditors were asked to sign a waiver absolving the city of responsibility in the event of injury or death. Ultimately, the tour was cancelled. Patterson joked to me that his tour of Oakland County required no waiver.

Patterson clearly enjoys having a driver, and has had one since his days as county prosecutor. Back in 2003, when he still occasionally drove himself, a sheriff's deputy stopped his weaving Ca-

dillac one night; Patterson was heading home after a golf outing. Instead of administering a blood-alcohol test, the deputy and a sergeant drove him home; later, they were suspended without pay. After the incident, the *Free Press* advised Patterson to prove that "he's serious about changing his work-hard, party-harder ways."

One cloudy Friday in August, 2012, an oncoming Volkswagen turned in front of the Chrysler 300 town car in which Patterson was riding, and the cars crashed. Neither Patterson nor his chauffeur, a retired Michigan state trooper, had on a seat belt. ("An old habit," Patterson told me.) The chauffeur was paralyzed from the neck down. The wreck broke Patterson's legs, both wrists, and several ribs, and he was in a coma for seventeen days. The election was three months later. He won it from a hospital bed. Seventeen months after the accident, he remains in a wheelchair, but he is expected to recover. Patterson's supporters, in conversations about him, nearly always note that he almost died, their words tinged with the implication of resurrection.

The Michigan media have called him a "dangerous demagogue" and "the clown prince" of the state's Republican Party, yet they endorse him. "Oakland County is the economic engine of a sputtering region," the *Free Press* editorialized, in 2008. The county has not voted Republican in a Presidential election since 1992, but Patterson wins big. "Your Worship," "Your Honor," "the infamous L. Brooks Patterson," and "the dynamo of Oakland County" are some of the ways his constituents greet him or introduce him. Bill Ballenger, a longtime analyst of Michigan politics, told me, "He's become such an iconic figure I don't think anyone perceives that they could beat him." Patterson's political appeal has its limits, though. Three times, he has tried for higher office—attorney general once, governor twice—but he has never won an election beyond Oakland's borders.

A weather alert beeped on his iPhone, advising caution until 11:30 P.M. Black clouds were building in the east. The day's high had reached a freakish ninety-seven degrees, and I mentioned something that I'd heard on the news: a Michigan man had been charged with killing

a child by leaving him in a hot car. The man lived in Pontiac, one of the county's few blue-collar towns. Pocketing his phone, Patterson said, "I hate to sound class-conscious, but this was a trailer park, where it happened. So I'm thinking. You know what? Little bit of trailer-trash mentality kicked in."

Tim, the driver, had been teasing him by predicting a ruined party, and now he said, "Those are high-pressure clouds. That means the cold front's rising, and—"

"Look, Gloom-and-Doom, stop it," Patterson told him.

"I'm just readin' the clouds, Brooks."

"Well, *stop* readin' em."

The party, which Patterson throws each year for family and close friends, had been planned for weeks. Eighty people had R.S.V.P.'d. Patterson was already one drink in, after stopping by the Rusty Bucket, a bar, to avail himself of the Whiskey Wednesday special. He'd made his usual request: Canadian Club-on-the-rocks, and "don't put out the fire."

Patterson's office is in a putty-colored building that resembles a giant computer punch card, on a campus-like government complex in Pontiac, which is the county seat. The first time I met him, he was rounding a corner of his fifth-floor suite, flanked by a group that included his early-shift driver (whom he introduced as "my investigator") and the attorney general of Michigan.

Patterson always has an entourage, but since the car accident it has grown considerably. In addition to the drivers, there's a rotating staff of nurses, in scrubs, who oversee his ablutions and wardrobe changes. They wheel him in and out of offices, taverns, and events, materializing and dematerializing as needed. He thanks the women with "sweetheart" and "babe," endearments that I also heard him use with female business leaders, department heads, and a judge. (A male employee whom he considers a friend might be addressed as "Numb Nuts.") After every sortie, the wheelchair gets folded up and stowed, like a portable throne.

That day, Patterson's right arm was in a sling; two days earlier, on his way into a fund-raiser, he had fallen, breaking his elbow. The arm now hung across his

torso, like that of a waiter in a four-star restaurant. Beneath the sling was an open cast, which, in a verbal slip, he called an "open casket." He wore his suit jacket around his shoulders, like a cape.

He wheeled into his office and took his place behind his desk, above which hung a picture of Abraham Lincoln. The room was immaculate and corporate, with a conference table and a leather sofa. Picture windows overlooked apple trees that had dropped their fruit. Later, when I recognized the view as the one in a framed photograph, of deer tracking past the trees on a snowy day, he made a joke about hunting from his office window. Patterson cannot resist punctuating every conversation with a ba-dump-bump moment. Ballenger, the political analyst, told me, "He's the best m.c. you've ever heard."

Many of Oakland County's sixty-two cities, villages, and townships are wealthy. In Bloomfield Hills, the average listing price for a home is nearly a million dollars. The city of Troy is considered one of the safest in Michigan. But Pontiac has crime problems, and a history of racial conflict. In the nineteen-seventies, a neighborhood association's opposition to court-ordered busing attracted the allegiance of the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan, one of whose members dynamited ten empty school buses. Patterson was the neighborhood association's lawyer. At the time, he had just been fired, after several years as a county prosecutor; he was working in private practice as he mounted a campaign to

professional athletes and rock stars book there when they come to Oakland County, to play the Palace.

We went downstairs and got into the minivan. Patterson explained that the chauffeured car functions as an extension of his office. He sits in the passenger seat, often with a file folder open in his lap, reading. "He prepares for everything," one of his colleagues told me. "It's the attorney in him."

Patterson said that he wanted to show me the airport, which had just been rebuilt. The minivan rolled up to an airy glass terminal with a "living wall" of greenery that, at the dedication ceremony, had prompted him to make a marijuana joke. He pointed out solar charging stations and hangars for hundreds of private aircraft. "All kinds of money" had been spent on landscaping. "I said, I want this place to look like Augusta," he said. "When clients land, I want to make a huge, favorable impression."

Soon after he became the county executive, in 1992, he set about giving Oakland an independent identity. He did not want his county to be seen as a scattered collection of bedroom communities or as an outgrowth of Detroit, even though Oakland is filled with former Detroiters and would not exist without them. Early in his first term, advised by a roundtable of industry and education leaders, including a former chairman of General Motors, he began molding Oakland into a full-service destination. The transformation is fully under way. A promotional infographic currently used to recruit multinational companies situates Oakland relative only to Chicago, Cleveland, Toronto, and New York. Detroit isn't on the map.

The new airport had been conceived as a corporate-services-and-cargo operation, with Fortune 500 companies and international clients in mind. As we went out to look at the tarmac, Patterson said, to no one in particular, "I don't think we want to tell her how we got the state to move a road so we could get three hundred more feet of runway." A second later, he told the story: Oakland had persuaded the state to reconfigure a dangerous intersection, which made possible the building of a runway extension that accommodated heavier planes. The biggest corporate clients could now



unseat the man who had dismissed him. In 1972, he won. His victory was connected to President Richard M. Nixon's landslide over George McGovern, but Patterson had also gained notoriety from the busing case.

He asked me where I was staying. When I mentioned a hotel in Pontiac, he frowned, and said, "You should have stayed at the Townsend," referring to an upscale hotel in Birmingham, with fireplaces and turndown service. Profes-

"ADAM AND EVE," BY LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER, 1526

She seems a mere girl really,
small-breasted and slim,
her body luminescent
next to Adam, who scratches
his head in mild perplexity.
So many baubles hang
from the tree
it didn't hurt to pick one.
The snake is a quicksilver curve
on a branch she is almost
young enough to swing from.

The garden bores her anyway:
no weedy chaos among
the flowers and vegetables;
the animals so tame
you can hardly tell the lamb
from the lion, the doe from the stag
whose antlers outline Adam's modesty.
She is like that teen-age girl
who wandered from the mall last week
not to be seen again, the world before her
glittering and perilous.

—Linda Pastan

fly cargo directly into Oakland County. "Detroit is off the beaten path," Patterson explained.

In the past sixty years, the population of Detroit has shrunk from two million to fewer than seven hundred thousand. Oakland's population has followed the reverse trajectory. In 1960, its population was just under seven hundred thousand. About 1.2 million people live there now. If suburbs are parasites, this one is consuming its host.

The county measures nine hundred and ten square miles, just shy of the size of Rhode Island. Patterson likes to say that sprawl represents jobs and population growth, which generate taxes, which fund schools and services, which attract yet more people and jobs. He has steadily recruited Chinese companies; he urged the public schools to teach Mandarin, and now they do. Patterson enjoys pointing out that Oakland sends Lansing many more millions of dollars, in taxes, than Lansing sends back in goods and services. Oaklanders include, or have included, Eminem, Kid Rock,

Madonna, Mitt Romney, Jimmy Hoffa, and—it has been rumored—those who disappeared Jimmy Hoffa. "It's starting to look like the surface of the moon, we've dug so many times for Jimmy Hoffa," he said.

Eight Mile Road marks the northern border of Detroit. On the other side is Oakland County. The farther north you go, the whiter the population. After thirty miles, you reach Independence, the township where Patterson lives; it's practically in the exurbs. After leaving the airport, we drove to his house, so that he could change clothes for the yacht party.

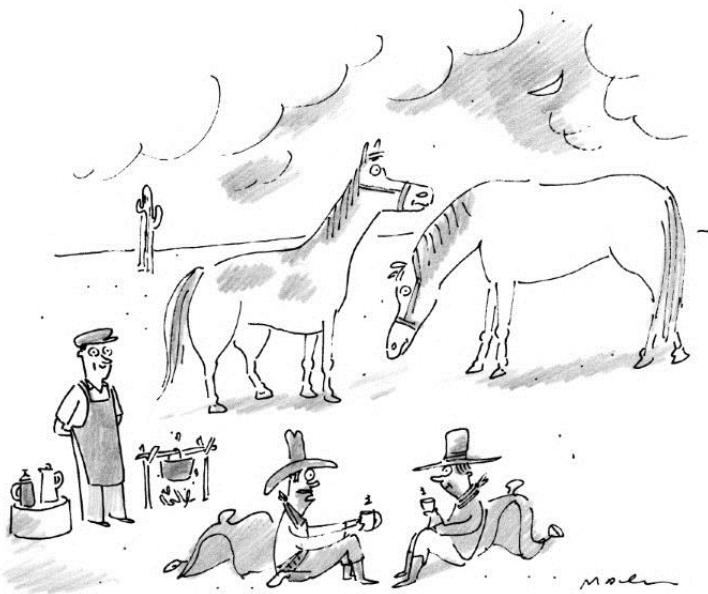
The minivan pulled into the driveway of a one-story house bordered by woods, where he has lived, alone, for eleven years. (His second divorce was fourteen years ago.) He went into the garage, and from there into the kitchen. The kitchen opened onto a dining area and a lodge-like den with plump earth-toned furniture that faced a fireplace. The dining table was strewn with prescription bottles and work papers. On the walls were framed photographs of

his four children. "That's Brooksie," he said, pointing out one of his sons. Seven years ago, Brooksie died, in a snowmobile accident. He was twenty-eight. Patterson had just announced an annual half-marathon to promote wellness in Oakland; the event was named the Brooksie Way.

Sliding glass doors overlooked a deck, and, beyond it, two deer stood nibbling leaves at the edge of the forest. Patterson watched them, rapt, until something startled them and they ran off. He went into the bedroom to change, and came out wearing khakis and an aqua shirt with the Oakland County logo embroidered on the sleeve. Detroit's motto, written after the fire of 1805, translates from the Latin as "We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes." Oakland County's symbol is a big green tree.

We drove to the Palace, the home of the Pistons. The staff was setting up for a Fall Out Boy concert, but Patterson was given arena access immediately. "He's like a rock star," William Mullan, his spokesman, whispered. "Nobody says no to him." On the arena floor, Patterson told me that he had thrown a party there, for members of Automation Alley, an association that he launched, in 1999, to help Oakland County compete with places like Silicon Valley for tech jobs. "When it started, I said, 'It's gonna take me twenty-five years to move from a manufacturing-oriented community to a knowledge-based community,'" he said. "Nah. It's gonna take me fifteen." His next goal is attracting five billion dollars in new investment, and he said that he is already halfway there. "We'll know we're there when we have more jobs outside manufacturing than in—when we have them in science and technology, and I.T., and, obviously, finance."

We drove to Rochester to see Meadow Brook Hall, a Tudor-revival mansion built by the Dodge family. "I used to bring the consuls-general here," he said. "I'd make the standard joke: 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is Oakland County's example of low-to-moderate-income housing.'" We then stopped by the Rainbow Connection, a nonprofit that Patterson founded in 1985, in honor of a friend who died, along with his two children, in a plane crash. The



"I admit that I was skeptical at first, but I'm really glad you insisted on bringing the barista."

foundation grants wishes to terminally ill children. "This'll be my side door into heaven," he said.

It's been suggested that crossing Eight Mile is like moving between parallel universes: one dangerous, one safe; one overwhelmingly black, the other overwhelmingly white; one poor, the other wealthy. Oaklanders, in the friendliest possible way, kept giving me sombre warnings about Detroit, as if it were a netherworld filled with immediate, certain peril. Don't go after dark, they advised; never stop directly behind another car; never ask for directions; never honk.

One Saturday morning, Patterson's driver took us two miles south of Eight Mile, to Glastonbury Road, on the northwest side of the city. "There's nothing there anymore," Patterson had told me. But it was a pleasant neighborhood of two-story homes, with tidy lawns, big trees, and sidewalks. Children were playing organized soccer in a park at the end of the street. The driver stopped in front of a well-tended brick house with white shutters, a shade tree, and a garage. Staring out the minivan's window, Patterson

muttered, "We used to think this street was *so* wide."

The house was built in 1939. Patterson's parents moved there in 1940. Brooks had an older sister, Harriet, and a fraternal twin brother, Steve. From the minivan, he pointed at a neighboring house where he once weeded flower beds. "I'd charge Mr. Bell by the foot, with a ruler," he recalled. "I'd give him a bill for three feet six inches. As a kid, you wanted to stick Mr. Bell for everything you could."

The Patersons had come from Indiana. The father worked at the Chrysler plant, first on the line, then in auditing, going from blue collar to white with only a high-school education. Patterson lived in the house through law school, except for two years he served in the Army, in Missouri. At one point, in high school, he considered joining the Marines. He recalled, "My dad, who never lost his temper, flew off, and said, 'You're gonna go to college.'" Patterson attended the University of Detroit, and graduated from its law school in 1967, the year of the city's worst race riot. He moved to Oakland County, to join a friend's law firm, and has been there ever since.

As the minivan idled, I told him that the place looked larger than thirteen hundred square feet; it certainly looked worth more than its assessed value, sixty thousand dollars.

"It's not Palmer Woods," he answered, referring to a historic neighborhood where the new mayor had bought a home. "But, on a scale of one to ten, this was probably a solid eight in its day."

His driver said, "It's still very nice."

"Yeah, compared to *other* parts of the city," Patterson said. "But it doesn't have that same panache that it had."

Vengeance led Patterson to politics, and after dethroning his old boss he spent his time as county prosecutor going after everything that he felt was wrong with society. He tried to reinstate capital punishment. Suspecting rampant welfare fraud in Michigan, he pushed the state to cut off payments to women who had children out of wedlock. (A local A.C.L.U. leader called his efforts attempted "genocide, pure and simple.") Patterson launched an organized-crime task force that excluded his own sheriff, another enemy. He urged a reform of the state's parole system and called for a network of "court watchers" to monitor the behavior of jurists and lawyers. His crackdown on strip clubs and porn shops "had nothing to do with morality," he later told reporters. "I wasn't getting on my white horse. This was always an economic issue. It was about the effect these places have on the business climate in these communities."

He was nearly a year into his first term as prosecutor when, in 1973, Detroiters elected Coleman Young. An influential state legislator and a former United Auto Workers activist, Young began his tenure with an inaugural speech in which he warned "all dope pushers" and "rip-off artists" and "muggers" to "leave Detroit—hit Eight Mile Road." Patterson didn't appreciate it: Young seemed to be sending the city's criminals into the suburbs.

The crusades continued. Patterson argued before the U.S. Supreme Court for a relaxed Miranda warning. He introduced a prosecutorial policy against drunk drivers; the district's judges refused to comply with it, deeming it unconstitutional. He targeted divorced fathers who missed child-support payments. There was talk, locally, of the White

House. The state warned Patterson to stop using the county's letterhead and staff as campaign resources. He was criticized for staging self-aggrandizing press conferences.

At one point, Young, who had already irritated Patterson by referring to Oakland County as "the cornfields," called him a racist for having represented the anti-busing organization. Patterson fired back on the op-ed page: "If favoring the neighborhood school and opposing the attempt to make schoolchildren pawns of the federal court social experiment makes me a racist, then I plead guilty. If opposing Coleman Young's \$600 million Detroit subway, an extravagant and ineffective testament to his ego, makes me a racist, then I plead guilty.... If publicly stating...that future economic bailouts for Detroit are at an end until Detroit gets its own fiscal house in order makes me a racist, then I plead guilty."

In November of 1992, he won the high seat in Oakland County. "I intend to move past Coleman Young as a regional leader," he told reporters. "Oakland County is the epicenter of activity in the region."

One day during my first visit to Oakland County, Patterson was to deliver remarks at an awards luncheon for small-business entrepreneurs and their mentors. We drove to the Bloomfield Open Hunt Club, in Bloomfield Hills, where horses, wearing blankets, grazed in a pasture, and men wore navy blazers with gold buttons. "This is our concession to the upper crust," he said.

He was wheeled before the audience and given a mike. "The topic du jour around here is the bankruptcy of Detroit," he said. "How in the world did one of the top cities in America go from the pinnacle of success during World War Two to where it is today, with recriminations and on the verge of bankruptcy? Oakland County went completely the opposite way. What's the difference? Here, in this county, we understand the role of business and free enterprise."

The ballroom faced a large window that overlooked an indoor riding arena. Behind Patterson, helmeted riders, in boots and jodhpurs, circled.

"Business is a hot sell for us because it creates jobs, it pays taxes," he went on. "We're able to do things like put police

officers on the street, put judges on the bench. We can fund our schools and put good teachers in the schools, so that we have quality education. You can't have a good quality of life without quality education. And it all comes down to whether you've got a job." He added, "The Chinese have a great proverb: 'One generation plants the seeds, the next generation relaxes in the shade.' We're planting a lot of seeds."

In addition to Automation Alley, Oakland County has programs that court foreign biotech, biomedical, and alternative-energy companies, and that encourage life-science companies to collaborate with universities and hospitals. The county is getting into cloud computing. A thousand companies from forty countries, many from Germany and Japan, have set up operations in Oakland County; among them are Siemens, Volkswagen, Honda, and Toshiba. As Detroit tried to right itself by borrowing and spending—Q-tips applied to a cut jugular—Patterson's administration froze government hiring, eliminated positions through attrition, and reconfigured pension and health-care plans. It stopped health-care costs from escalating by starting a wellness program for county employees, and the three-year budget cycle went into effect.

"I hire the best in the business and then get out of their way," Patterson told me, and then proceeded to knock Detroit. "None of my guys are under indictment. None of my guys are going to prison. There's not one of them that I wouldn't leave my checkbook out in front of." Paul Tait, the executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, told me, "Even when I deal with national associations, I haven't seen anybody that good. The Oaklanders are very confident, almost to the point of arrogance. Wait, not 'almost'—often to the point of arrogance." He said, "But more often than not they're right."

Hearing Patterson talk reminded me of financial-independence seminars, and of the tearful press conference that he gave when he returned to work after the automobile accident. His daughter, a schoolteacher, accompanied him to the event, and told reporters, "I always say, 'You know, there's four children in our family, but, really, there was five. Oakland County is the fifth child, that he probably loves most.'" Before taking the

mike at the hunt-club luncheon, he told me, "I like to fix things that are broken and create things that don't exist."

He wrapped up his speech with a funny story about a female employee and a bouquet of flowers. A woman at the head table said, to her husband, "Ha, ha! He's cute!" The crowd clapped madly.

At its widest, Eight Mile is an eight-lane road; it runs east to west for more than twenty miles, and is lined with businesses, churches, cemeteries, and bungalows. One day in November, Bill McGraw, a reporter who has covered the region for more than three decades, first at the *Free Press* and now at Deadline Detroit, an online startup, pointed out the differences. "If you call the police in Ferndale, on the Oakland County side, they'll be there in seconds," he said as he drove. His iPhone, which had a scanner app that monitored Fire Department activity, crackled. "On the Oakland side, the street lights all work. On this side"—he meant this stretch of Detroit—"you can see what's thriving: liquor stores. On this side, if anybody bumps into the back of us, God forbid, the police won't come."

Patterson is on the board of an Eight Mile civic-improvement organization. One morning, as he gave me a tour of the boulevard, his driver that day, an ex-cop named Steve, said, "You'll notice that on the Detroit side there are lots of strip clubs. Mr. Brooks doesn't allow that."

"It destroys neighborhoods," Patterson said. "There's not a topless bar in Oakland County, not an X-rated movie theatre, not a house of ill repute. I shut 'em down." He explained that he couldn't prevent such businesses from opening in Oakland County, but that certain measures could make it difficult for them to succeed. "If you can't get a liquor license, you're out of business," he told me. "Can't run a titty house without drinks." He went on, "I'm not a prude. I'm a guy who wants to protect my neighbors, protect my community."

"You get auto-theft guys in there, you get blood gangsters in there," Steve said. "Shootings inside, shootings outside." He was carrying a .40-calibre Sig Sauer.

Patterson said, "Nothing but headaches and crime."

His phone rang, and he answered it, speaking to the caller encouragingly for a few minutes. She was an Oakland

County municipal employee who, like Patterson, had lost a child and then suffered a debilitating injury. Whenever she calls, he tells her, "There's never a good day, but some days are not quite as bad as others." I asked Patterson if the woman had his personal number. "Yep," he said.

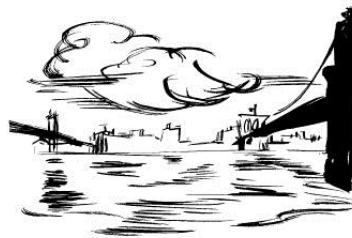
We passed the city waterworks, a beautiful but decayed building on the Detroit River. The city wanted to regionalize the water system, he said. "But the debt—why would I want to pick up a share of that? I had no responsibility for creating it." Isn't that where Oakland got its water? "Yeah, but I pay my bills," he said. "So if they chose not to put the money into deferred maintenance, like they were supposed to all along—some of the pipes, the sluices, are still wood. They never upgraded them. Now, all of a sudden, they're having problems and they want to give part of the responsibility to the suburbs? It doesn't make any sense. They're not gonna talk me into being the good guy. 'Pick up your share?' Ha, ha."

Part of Patterson's strategy involves saying no to Detroit, and keeping its officials "out of my pocket." In 2012, he backed establishing a tax in Oakland to help support the ailing Detroit Institute of Arts, whose collection is estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The tax went into effect, but Patterson threatened to take it back when the city started talking about selling off art work as part of the bankruptcy proceedings. He has long opposed large-scale mass transit because he believes that it's too expensive, and that Oaklanders wouldn't use it. In the mid-nineties, when the Lions contemplated leaving Oakland County for downtown, he threatened to sue the city, and to cut off Oakland's support for a badly needed makeover of Detroit's Cobo Center, which hosts one of the world's largest auto shows. And he called a city plan to build casinos "a declaration of war," telling reporters, "I'm going to protect my home turf."

Not surprisingly, this plays well in Oakland County. "You've heard Michigan fans say they bleed blue? Well, he bleeds Oakland County," the wife of a deputy county executive told me. From memory, she cited Patterson's governing philosophy. "If it's good for Detroit and good for Oakland County, I'm for it; if

it's good for Detroit and neutral for Oakland County, I'm for it; if it's good for Detroit and bad for Oakland County, I'm against it."

Tellingly, Patterson leaves "good for Oakland County and bad for Detroit" out of his formulation. It is possible to see the county's success as largely dependent on the city's decline, as white flight dispersed some of Detroit's strongest resources into suburbia. McGraw, of Deadline Detroit, said, "Patterson had a



platform, and he used it to denigrate Detroit and Detroiters, and to give voice to people who have moved out of the city and resent what the city has become—even though their departures contributed to it. Instead of being a leader who says, 'We're gonna work with Detroit,' he's been perceived as an enemy of Detroit, because he's *acted* like an enemy. For so many years, he's been a drumbeat: 'Detroit is bad. Detroiters are out to rip us off. They want tax breaks, but look how well we're managing *our* county.' He did manage the county well. But it's so much easier to manage growth than it is to manage loss or blight."

The urban theorist Richard Florida, whose wife is from Oakland County, told me that Oaklanders need "to stop the nonsense of thinking they can survive without the city." He said, "They have it easy. They have wealthy people, and virtually no poor. They have the upsides without the costs. How selfish."

One morning in November, Patterson went into Detroit to meet with Mike Duggan, the new mayor. The meeting took place at the historic Detroit Athletic Club, in a small room overlooking Comerica Park, where the Tigers play. A Christmas tree stood in one corner, and in the center of the room was a table set with cups and saucers, and a carafe of coffee.

When Patterson saw Duggan, he

cried, "Hey, pal!" and they shook hands. They have known each other since the eighties, when Duggan became the deputy executive of Wayne County. Duggan is fifty-five and looks almost cherubic: stocky and nearly bald, he has high, ruddy cheekbones and a broad nose. He won as a write-in candidate, becoming the first white mayor in forty years.

"One of the things Detroit has going for it is that there are a lot of young people, in this next generation, who do not want the suburban life style, with the minivans," he told me. "They like the urban experience."

In the past few years, investors such as Dan Gilbert, the billionaire founder of Quicken Loans, have moved out of Oakland County and into downtown, energizing the city's core. Tait, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments director, told me, "Oakland County was always aggressive, in a good way, in attracting development, but it's been an eye-opener for them that the pattern is starting to reverse, in large part because of the investment decisions of a relatively small group of businessmen who are making decisions to buy up buildings in downtown Detroit, and bring in a heck of a lot of workers."

At a bar, Patterson had told me that it was "too late" for a Detroit turnaround. With Duggan in the room, he spoke more carefully. "I don't think it'll ever be back to the shining city on the hill that it was after World War Two," he said. "We led the nation in salary and life style, created the middle class. Everybody had a cabin up north. It's gonna be hard to go back and capture those days. Mike's gonna try, for sure."

Duggan said, "My campaign manager, Bryan Barnhill—twenty-seven years old, a Harvard grad—he grew up across from city airport, was working on Wall Street, and came back home to help rebuild the city. That's the generation of leaders that's with me. He doesn't remember when Hudson's was downtown. He has his own vision of what a quality city's gonna be." Duggan was referring to J. L. Hudson, a department store that, in the fifties, opened a location in an Oakland County megamall; Hudson closed its downtown flagship in the eighties, and Patterson has often referred to this as a tipping point for Detroit. "The goal is not to rebuild Hudson's," Duggan went

on. "The goal is to create a city where we're a center of invention and entrepreneurialism, like we were in the early nineteen-hundreds. *That's* what we've gotta build."

Soon, Duggan said that he had to get to a meeting with the governor. Before departing, he asked Patterson about his health, and told him that he was looking good. Patterson seemed to take this as a challenge. "I can stand," he said, and, bracing himself against the table, he did.

The yacht, called the Infinity, remained anchored at the dock. It was raining now, and lightning flashed, but none of the guests on board seemed to notice. The women wore high heels, the men Top-Siders. Chafing dishes exhaled the steam of potato casseroles, and a waiter carried around a tray of chocolate-dipped strawberries. On the upper deck, two musicians performed pop tunes. Patterson, his drink constantly refreshed, received well-wishers at a table in the bow.

Don Maurer, a retired steel executive, said of him, "He's got something that the new politicians don't have: relationships. At one time, there were verbal agreements, and you didn't just step on people. Now it's whoever's got the lowest bid gets the deal."

Forrest Milzow, a developer and an old friend, said, "Brooks never measures the political wind. He does what he thinks is right."

Patterson's second ex-wife, Kathy, was on board. When she met Patterson, she was a single mother of two, waiting tables. They were married for twenty-five years. She has been engaged to another man for more than a decade, but she told me, "I'm never getting remarried. I'm going to be engaged forever. I like my name: Patterson."

After two hours, the yacht finally eased out onto the lake. Several men hauled Patterson by his belt loops to the upper deck, where the musical duo was covering Fleetwood Mac and KC and the Sunshine Band. Rain streaked the windows, and a few of the Michiganders stared into the darkness, trying to identify the nearly invisible shoreline of Canada. Someone cheerily mentioned the possibility of waterspouts. The plan was to cruise down the Detroit River and past the skyline, but the boat turned back before the city came into view. ♦

Advertisement



"Good news—I hear the paradigm is shifting."

TALK TO US.

Share your insights on a variety of topics with *The New Yorker's* marketing department as a member of our online Opinion Leaders panel. As one of our most influential readers, you'll gain VIP access to exclusive *New Yorker* events and special offers from our advertisers.

Sign up at NewYorkerOpinionLeaders.com/join
and you could win a 16GB Apple iPad® mini with Wi-Fi + cellular.

THE
NEW YORKER
OPINION LEADERS

NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. For full rules, including alternate method of entry, visit www.newyorkeropinionleaders.com/join. Starts 12:01 P.M. E.T. October 1, 2013 and ends 11:59 P.M. E.T. March 31, 2014. Open to legal residents of the 50 United States/DC, 18 years of age or older as of the date of entry, except employees of Sponsor and Administrator, their immediate families and those living in the same household. Odds of winning depend on the number of entries received. Void outside the 50 United States/DC and where otherwise prohibited. A.R.V. of prize is \$459. Sponsor: Condé Nast, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. The Administrator is Vision Critical Communications Inc., 200 Granville Street, Mezzanine, Vancouver, BC, V6C 1S4 Canada. Apple Inc. is not a sponsor of this sweepstakes.

Condé Nast 2014.