

THE BAY CITY TIMES

Young talent needs to know that Bay City is where to go

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Time and again over the years of our economic demise, we've heard and hosted a familiar lament. If we could just get the right kinds of jobs here, the talented young people who will rebuild our region will follow.

Perhaps.

But flip that economic development goal on its head, state and national experts are saying, to find a more powerful impetus for change.

Build a place where young, college-educated people want to live and play, and they will come and find - even create! - their work.

It's the conclusion of a report released in July by the nonprofit, private-public Michigan Future Inc.

For Michigan and Bay City, that means more college degrees are needed. It's the main reason for the rigors of the new Michigan Merit Curriculum in our high schools. We must prepare our children for college, then usher them through to at least a bachelor's degree.

This carefully planned strategy for success fails Michigan when our young move to Chicago, or Minneapolis or Seattle - cities where, first of all, they want to live, and then eventually do find work.

In the Chicago metro area, that economic dynamo of the Midwest, 21.3 percent of all households are young professionals; in booming Minneapolis, ditto.

In Metro Detroit, on the other hand, 14.7 percent of all households are young professionals.

In Bay County, just 3.7 percent of all households are young professionals. In Bay City, it's awful - 2.8 percent.

It doesn't have to be this way for Bay City, nor for Detroit and Michigan's other cities.

What don't we offer young professionals that other metropolitan areas do? What assets can we sell that we've hardly considered pitching?

Bay City would seem in the catbird seat, with a wagon load of promise for young professionals.

But we must sell our city.

Safe, clean streets? A small, but very vibrant local music and arts scene? Parks and pathways? Way-affordable housing? Check, check, check and check.

So sell it. Far-away colleges, for example, hold recruitment fairs all the time. Bay City ought to be at all of them, selling itself.

There's more we must do. Bay City leaders wisely approved an Obsolete Properties Rehabilitation Act district for tax breaks on our town's empty upper stories. Yet little has been done to remodel those spaces for affordable apartments and funky studio spaces.

Find the financing for such ventures. Our public leaders must work with property owners to address regulatory barriers. We simply must show young professionals the places where they can live in the thick of Bay City's growing cultural scene, right downtown, across the river on Midland Street or in nearby business districts.

Take any number of vacant commercial or factory buildings and turn them into incubators for tinkerers and other entrepreneurs.

We've got it going on, Bay City. But we've also got to make young, educated professionals our main focus.

Sure, maybe some of those we'd attract will be our own children. That would be grand.

But it's not the main point. We need even more young people than our own in order to thrive.

The Michigan Future report says that in study after study, "the inescapable conclusion is that place matters" to young, highly mobile talent.

Invite them all to Bay City, where we can become their city.