

Leaders emphasize need to retain younger grads

BY KATHLEEN GRAY and TOM WALSH • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS • May 29, 2008

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MACKINAC ISLAND -- The sorry state of Michigan's economy set a pessimistic tone on the first day of the Detroit Regional Chamber's Mackinac Policy Conference as Edsel Ford II and other Michigan business leaders said the state hasn't made much progress in the last year.

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"The state policy makers raised taxes and reduced spending, which I think was the right thing to do," said Paul Hillegonds, a former speaker of the House of Representatives and a senior vice president at DTE Energy. "But they did little to fix the structural deficit in the state."

The state's per-capita income has dropped from 16th among U.S. states in 2000 to 26th in 2006, an unprecedented drop, said Lou Glazer, president of Michigan Future. And the state remains 34th in the percentage of residents who have college degrees.

The indicators, Glazer said, stand in contrast with prosperous regions in the nation that have a high number of young professionals and a resulting enviable per-capita income.

"We must get younger and better educated, or we will get poorer," Glazer said.

Community leaders and residents are weary of partisan politics in Lansing, he said, and are ready for more collaboration and cooperation to help turn the state around.

"We're looking for problem solving, not partisan potshots," he said.

Toward that end, the center is working to fill open seats in the state House of Representatives with politicians ready to work together.

"We don't care which party wins the seats, but what's on the mind of those candidates," Power said.

The center has been having informal meetings with about three dozen legislators amenable to helping create a less-partisan environment in Lansing.

Detroit Regional Chamber Chief Executive Dick Blouse said that leaders have the opportunity to make a mark.

"We're at a real crossroads in our state, our region -- and our nation, too, for that matter," he said.

Retaining and attracting new talent to the state are key to its revival, he said.


"And the question is, are we going to keep talking about it or actually do something. We're doing something at the chamber with this new internship program that our folks think can place as many as 20,000 kids in jobs with Michigan companies," Blouse said. "My experience is that if you get a kid as an intern for a year or two and they're doing a good job, you don't want to let him or her get away."

Terry Barclay, president of the Inforum, formerly the Women's Economic Forum, said the message may have been harsh, but the resolve to fix the problems is great.

"The first step for any change is to be honest about the problems," Barclay said.

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