



Keeping smart, young workers is key to growth

Thursday, February 14, 2008

By Julia Bauer

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- This region needs to get younger and smarter fast if it hopes to win the race for a fresh generation of well-educated workers.

That economic marathon is growing tougher for cities in Michigan, Lou Glazer, president of Michigan Future Inc., told a small crowd at a midday news conference by the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce.

Glazer and Don Grimes, a researcher with the University of Michigan Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, outlined West Michigan's progress in fostering a "knowledge economy." The event is one of several statewide focusing on data being tracked by Michigan Future Inc.

Compared to Detroit and Lansing, Glazer said, downtown Grand Rapids "does a better job of keeping college-educated, highly compensated families in the city."

Glazer and Grimes countered Kalamazoo-based economist George Erickcek, who earlier this week championed growth based on the region's strengths -- manufacturing and office furniture.

Don't lean on manufacturing, Glazer advised the group, because that sector doesn't create the "knowledge" jobs that pay high wages for high education.

The economists differ, he said, because Erickcek tracks employment numbers while Glazer focuses on income levels.

The seven-county regional rate of college-educated residents, 24 percent of the total population, makes the race for high-paid jobs a tough one. The ideal ratio is a college-educated population of 30 to 40 percent.

In the latest survey, only the largest U.S. metropolitan areas are attracting graduates at that rate.

"You've got a long way to go," Glazer said. "You can't get to the national average (27 percent), much less the big-metro average (32.2 percent)."

Making Michigan home for more college graduates is a top mission for Glazer's organization. Other recommendations include a focus on the culture of the region and an accepting attitude toward all types of people.

The biggest job growth is in health care, higher education, finance and insurance, Glazer said. College graduates older than 25 are choosing locale first and job second.

"Watch where the young, smart people go," he said.

"Wherever they go, prosperity will follow."

Glazer summed up the dilemma.

"If we don't get younger and better educated, we will get poorer," he said.

One audience member challenged Glazer's premise under the weight of a sluggish economy.

"I would love to stay in Grand Rapids and I'm ready to graduate, but I can't find a job," said Sarah Allsbrooks, a senior at Grand Valley State University.

After the session, Allsbrooks, a political science major, described a frustrating search for jobs online, using Monster.com and other search engines.

"I found jobs with only 20 or 30 hours a week, but I need benefits," she said. "Washington, D.C., has tons of jobs, so I'm leaning toward that right now."

Allsbrooks graduates in April.

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