

Making Michigan an attractive place for the young

Saturday, July 19, 2008

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Special To The Press

Here is Michigan's economic challenge of the century: Far too many young, highly educated people are leaving our state. Our children and grandchildren are graduating from Michigan colleges and universities and moving to places with certain lifestyle amenities not found here. Leaving with them are the skills and talents suitable for the jobs that are paying high wages in the industries that are thriving in the new economy.

These young, educated and mobile workers are leaving Michigan to live, work and play in cities such as Chicago, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Denver, Boston and others. Research published in February by Michigan Future, Inc., an Ann Arbor public policy think tank, shows that the states with the lowest unemployment rates and highest personal income levels have at least one large metropolitan area with a high concentration of college-educated young people.

The research found none of the cities is in Michigan. Not one.

Why are so many young people leaving Michigan? Contrary to what we might suppose, they are not leaving for a job. Rather, they are leaving for a place. Only after finding the place that offers the lifestyle they seek do they go job hunting. And when they get there, they are finding jobs -- relatively high-paying jobs -- because the industries that are booming are also locating there.

What do these places offer that can't be found in Michigan? They have:

- Mass transit and other alternatives to driving. Young workers who are creating the new prosperity want to get around town without having to drive. They want buses, light rail, bike paths and other transportation options.
- "Walkable" neighborhoods -- places where they can live, work and socialize within walking distance of each other.
- Cafes, coffee houses, easy access to the Internet, and lots of cultural activities -- music, museums, theaters.
- Lots of rental housing. Today's young people would rather rent than own. No longer do they view home ownership as a good early-life investment. They also don't necessarily want "large" places to live. That's because they want to "hang out" with friends their own age as much as possible, so the neighborhood cafes, coffee houses and clubs have become their family rooms.

Michigan's challenge is clear. As our economy continues to speed away from the smokestack industries that brought prosperity to generations of Michigan families, we must create new opportunities to keep more of our children and grandchildren here. That will happen when state and federal policymakers agree to policies and investments that create places where prosperity happens.

Detroit will never be Chicago. Grand Rapids will never be Boston. Ann Arbor will never be Minneapolis. Perhaps they can be better? Clearly, they must become different places than they are today. As a state, we must commit to preserving what is great about our urban areas and work together, public and private sector alike, on programs and initiatives that will enable us to compete with cities in states that are already far ahead of Michigan on the path to prosperity in the new economy.

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