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State's future: Build a better Michigan? Start with smarts, creativity

A Lansing State Journal editorial

The face of Michigan's economic future may look a lot like R.E. Olds.

Come again? Isn't the old, industrial economy - so wedded to the legacy of Olds and other automotive pioneers - the reason Michigan is struggling?

True. But the people who jump-started the automotive age with innovation and risk-taking ... their spiritual "heirs" will be the ones to lead Michigan out of the economic swamp.

That is a significant conclusion in a new report from Michigan Future Inc., a nonpartisan organization studying how the state can flourish in a knowledge-based economy.

"The changes we are going through are as basic and dislocating as the change when we left farms and craft production to move to cities and mass production factories a century ago," the report said. "Because we embraced the new - and left behind the old - quicker than anyone else, we became one of the leading-edge communities in the world for the first half of the twentieth century."

The report, "A New Agenda for a New Michigan," is a stark, yet hopeful, warning to the state. It explains the failures: "If Michigan's knowledge-based industries had grown at the same rate as the country, there would be 223,000 more Michiganians working today in this growing, good-paying sector of the economy."

And it charts a detailed course for change, including the critical need to emphasize education. "The only reliable path to a high-prosperity Michigan is to be concentrated in knowledge-based enterprises," the report said.

To paraphrase a Clintonian slogan, "It's knowledge, stupid."

What Michigan must do, the report said, is amass a deep talent pool; talent being defined by Michigan Future as knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship.

The new economy's R.E. Olds is the kind of person Michigan must educate and recruit. For starters, "A New Agenda for a New Michigan" ought to be required reading.