

Column: State leaders, residents must put the money where our future is

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By Peter Luke

Michigan's various soul-searching exercises lamenting that the past is past but the future is so uncertain omit a salient point:

Like it or not, the state has to do more to shape what comes next.

Two key points contained in a new report written by a lot of smart people for Michigan Future Inc., an Ann Arbor public policy group, address that.

Kids, with the support of everyone, have to go to school and take the initiative to learn something that will enable them to build not only their own futures, but Michigan's. And popular perception to the contrary, the people of Michigan aren't overtaxed.

Michigan Future's report, co-authored by a varied group of policy-makers in the public, private and nonprofit sectors, is a starting point.

What's needed is a public education campaign that offers up a positive direction but requires tough decisions, cooperation and the willingness to give a little.

The starting point is education. Michigan's schools by and large function well; they will function better when new academic standards required for college enrollment are demanded. A better-educated work force will attract new types of businesses to a state going through profound economic transformation.

In the end, it will be up to students to demand more of themselves. Every decent-paying job from here on out will require a college degree and the K-12 preparation to attain one.

The Michigan Future report falls short in that it doesn't make the same demands on Michigan's political leaders as it does on its youth.

If students must do more, those requiring additional help should be able to receive it whether it means smaller schools, smaller class sizes or tutoring corps in every district.

Michigan's model system of higher education was built on a premise of financial accessibility, whereby taxpayers paid more in state aid to universities so that students paid less, about a 2-to-1 ratio. That ratio has been turned on its head over the past two decades.

Higher academic standards for high school leave less time for vocational training. But that merely recognizes that school is no longer a K-12 proposition, but a K-14 one that leaves community colleges in the best position to teach technical career skills. Students don't pay to attend 12th grade; a lack of money shouldn't preclude them from attending grade 13.

Michigan Future calls for vibrant cities to which college graduates will flock. The obvious way to lessen overall poverty in Detroit or Flint is to add residents who aren't poor.

If the cities are crucial to the state's economic future, it's crucial that cities are safe. Michigan has fewer state and local police officers per capita than just about every other major industrial state, according to a 2004 federal report. Illinois had 28 police per 10,000 people; Michigan had 20. Michigan has to do more to clear guns off the street, sweep drug criminals out of neighborhoods and, generally, better enforce criminal and civil law.

Finally, what infrastructure is needed to ensure that new urban economies have the ability to lure commercial and residential development? Not just roads, but land assembly for public and private development, urban forestry and parks, mass transit.

Underlying all of this, of course, is money. Until people understand that they'll have to pay for a better Michigan, it can't happen.

Republicans in this state believe their hold on power rests with an incessant tax-cut strategy that has left this state poorer, not richer. Democrats don't have the backbone to challenge it. So there's no debate.

The most important statistics in the Michigan Future paper report that per capita state and local taxes in Michigan were \$90 below the national average in 2002. After still more cuts in the income tax, the gap is larger now.

Minnesota was \$532 above the per capita national average; Illinois \$160. Split the difference and take Michigan there. State and local governments would have \$3.5 billion more annually for schools, public safety and public works. Alabama, by the way, is \$973 below the average.

Every candidate this election year should have to answer whether Michigan should be more like Minnesota or more like Alabama.

It's a question voters might also want to ask of themselves.

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