

Michigan 10.0: How do we create cool cities that retain talented Millennials?

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George Bosnjak and his wife, Jill, dine out on the deck at The B.O.B., one of the places they often hang out. They're two Millennials who decided to stay in Michigan.

"Bright flight" is the topic for the June installment of **our Michigan 10.0 series**, which explores the problems facing Michigan and how we might solve them.

Sunday's Grand Rapids Press is the only place where you'll find the complete package exploring how the state can lure talent and keep our sharpest young people - namely college-educated Millennials - here. The newspaper will include lots of faces of local young people and their thoughts on why they stayed or why they chose to leave Michigan.

There are some surprising conclusions from experts: Our brain drain isn't just due to lack of jobs.

"You can't imagine the number of kids who go to Chicago and initially just wait tables. It's not just the job.

Place matters," says Lou Glazer, president of Ann Arbor's **Michigan Future Inc.** "Young professionals increasingly are concentrating in central cities. We need central cities to work to stay in the game."

We want to hear what your thoughts. **Join us here** Tuesday at 1:30 p.m. for a live chat with Hopwood Depree, founder of TicTock Studios, a West Michigan-based film production company, and Kevin Buist, who describes himself as "artist, nerd, rabble-rouser, director of artist relations for ArtPrize" **on his Twitter account.**

Closing the gap between the haves and the have-nots in American cities' battle for young minds is not an exact science.

And it's not just about adding trendy coffee shops, a giant IKEA store or prettying up riverfronts, though those certainly can't hurt the cause.

Professional groups, think tanks, planners, business groups and social media networks expound endlessly on the topic, arguing a state's economic vitality and future depends on how well urban areas lure innovative and energetic 20- and 30-somethings.



Solutions vary, but here's what some experts say cities like Grand Rapids can do to ooze "cool" for these urbanites:

1. Make core-city areas more walkable and provide extensive mass transit to reduce reliance on cars.



Lou Glazer

"It's a greener generation. These kids don't want a car increasingly," Glazer says. "It's a huge generational change." Unfortunately, he says, there "really is no place in Michigan that's the right scale" to promote the "walkable urbanism" and mass transit that Millennials demand.

"For young professionals we talk to, it's one of their top agenda items," says John Bebow, executive director of The Center for Michigan, another Ann Arbor think tank. Kent County voters' defeat last year of a millage request to expand rapid transit also hurt, says Glazer, who even suggests the community consider a

light rail system that could run from downtown to East Grand Rapids.

Encouraging use of the existing public bus system and "having a nice affordable mix of downtown living is important," adds Mandee Rick, president of the **Grand Rapids Young Professionals group**. "We do ourselves a disservice by not pushing the transit system that's already there."

2. Make the city a more welcoming place by embracing and promoting diversity.

"We need to be welcoming to immigrants, people from all religions, races and ethnic groups and varied lifestyles," a 2006 Michigan Future report says. "Leading-edge metropolitan areas are a tapestry of people from all backgrounds. Tolerant attitudes and great diversity characterize successful regions. Unfortunately in Michigan, we have a long way to go."

"It's gotten better, but we do have to continually educate the changes that are occurring," acknowledges Sonya Hughes, vice president of diversity initiatives for the **Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce**. When interviewing job candidates, she says, employers must be sensitive to their racial and ethnic backgrounds, showing them places where their interests and cultural heritage are reflected here. The city also must boost diversity in downtown entertainment.

Another obstacle to progressive-minded Millennials?

"West Michigan does have a well-deserved reputation for religious conservatism, and this might concern younger folks considering a move here," concedes Fred Stella, president of the **Interfaith Dialogue Association**. "But there are so many examples of progressive spirituality and diverse religions that I believe the tide will turn."

Turning that tide means encouraging more tolerance for different religions, races, social causes and gay/lesbian lifestyles. Millennials are "very progressive when it comes to gay issues. The more inclusive we are in that department, the more we'll be viewed as a modern destination city."

3. Create a business and education environment attune to change and risks.

MICHIGAN 10.0 ON COOL CITIES

SUNDAY: Setting the scene

MONDAY

- Catching up on Cool Cities grantees
- The Uptown neighborhood in Grand Rapids as a model

TUESDAY

- **Live chat:** How do we rank as a cool city? Join Hopwood Depree and Kevin Buist to talk about how Michigan can retain young talent.
- Essay by Hopwood Depree

WEDNESDAY

- A young couple moves from California to Grand Rapids
- Essay by Rob Bliss

THURSDAY

- Essay by Suzanne Schultz
- Video of high school seniors talking about what they want in a hometown

SUNDAY

- What could a pro team do for Grand Rapids?



Daniel Estrada

Too often, fresh ideas get "a little bit suffocated" by West Michigan's culture and traditional business approach, says Daniel Estrada, president of **Grand Rapids' D.C. Estrada**. "People view change as a hard and unnecessary thing."

Forward-thinking urbanites with creative ideas for new businesses are "going to drive the recovery" because entrepreneurship "empowers young people to do what they like and what they're passionate about," insists Ryan Vaughn, of **Grand Valley State University's Center for Entrepreneurship & Innovation**. He applauds concepts like the **GRid70 design hub**, which assembles minds from Amway Corp., Wolverine World Wide, Meijer Inc. and Steelcase Inc. to share ideas.

Finding inventive ways to bolster Grand Rapids Public Schools' sagging graduation rate could help draw young families. A hot topic during a recent brainstorming session sponsored by **Rapid Growth Media**, the panel and audience said city schools must show improvement and tell their success stories better. As a model, some point to the Kalamazoo Promise, a free-college-tuition program in Kalamazoo Public Schools, as an initiative with a dramatic impact on graduation rates.

4. Enhance opportunities for aiding charitable causes and influencing civic leadership.

Tap the feeling of those staying here that they "can be part of building the future," says Detroit Sarah Szurpicki, of the **Great Lakes Urban Exchange**. "I've lived in New York and it was a lot of fun, but I didn't feel like I was part of a bigger community. There's greater access to people here who are decision-makers ... and a greater sense that anyone who's choosing to live in the cities that they can be part of rethinking the future of that city."



Diana Sieger

Events and causes that allow young urbanites to give back "really seem to be gaining steam," says Diana Sieger, president of the **Grand Rapids Community Foundation**. Much of that is driven by online social networking, which hails daily opportunities to attend benefits or help charities. "There's a lot of energy that's out there in helping people get involved with some key things in the community."

Still, says Rick, "we could do a better job of trying to connect people with what's going on around town other than the bar scene. There could be more coordination amongst the groups."

5. **Evangelize for Grand Rapids and other Michigan cities with a bright future.**

Michigan's economic woes have colored the national perception of the Great Lakes State and too few Millennials are familiar with urban areas outside of Detroit.

"It's about being proud of what we've become as a region and telling our story," says Kevin Stotts, vice president of community programs for the Chamber, which recently unveiled a **"Hello West Michigan" campaign with a coalition of employers dubbed Quaeris**. The online resource aids recruiting, giving job candidates details about West Michigan and touting such advantages as the region's "average commute time of 22 minutes." It might even help attract "boomerangs," Stotts contends, those Michigan natives who have left but may consider returning.

"It's about changing perceptions. The more we're adding new talent, the better it is, because we're raising the talent pool for the entire region."

Bebow says Grand Rapids also must more aggressively market its "pocketbook competitiveness" to young urbanists, because the cost of living here is far cheaper than in Chicago and New York. And he's praised Grand Rapids online, calling it "a smaller, more livable Chicago."