

## Column: Michigan cities have to work on being cool

Wednesday, May 23, 2007

By Rick Haglund

Two of Michigan's most serious economic problems -- and we've got plenty -- are these:

Many of our brightest and most educated young people are leaving. And our cities, where many young people want to live, are dying.

An April survey by the Detroit Free Press of 640 students at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University found that 53 percent said they planned to leave the state after graduation.

Detroit has lost an estimated 105,614 people, 11.1 percent of its population, from the 2000 census to May 1 of this year, according to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, a regional planning agency.

In a new Brookings Institutions report this week, six Michigan cities ranked among the 80 economically weakest cities in the country, according to a variety of measures that included poverty and unemployment rates, and household income.

Those cities are Detroit, East Lansing, Flint, Kalamazoo, Muskegon and Saginaw. Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids ranked near the average for economic vitality among the 376 cities studied.

Our public policy strategies for fixing these problems have centered mainly on the belief that more young people, especially college graduates, will stay in Michigan if there are jobs for them. We also believe that the key to rebuilding our cities is to improve the public schools so that families will return to urban centers.

But Laurie Volk, a New Jersey consultant who advises local governments and developers on the market potential for urban housing, says we've got it all wrong.

Volk, who recently testified before the House New Economy and Quality of Life Committee in Lansing and before business and community groups in Detroit, says jobs and school systems are overrated in urban revitalization.

Young people are looking to live in "cool" cities where there are lots of entertainment options, an active nightlife and restaurants and movies they can walk to, Volk told me in a telephone interview.

They'll move to such places, including Chicago, Boston and Austin, Texas, even if they don't have jobs, Volk said.

"They're risk-takers," she said. "They can go anywhere they choose, and if they don't find work, they'll start their own companies."

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has undertaken a number of "Cool Cities" initiatives to revitalize urban areas, but the Brookings report suggests there is much more work to do.

Phil Gardner, director of research at Michigan State University's Collegiate Employment Research Institute, agrees with Volk, especially when it comes to nearby Chicago.

"Young people want to go to a fun place with a lot going on and the possibility of jobs," he said. "And being close to their parents is a consideration."

They might bunk in with friends for a while and take temporary jobs such as waiting tables while they seek more permanent employment, Gardner says.

Volk calls these young people "millennials," the 78 million people born between 1977 and 1996. They make up a generation nearly as large as the 82 million baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964.

Unlike the boomers, most millennials don't want to live in single-family homes in the suburbs, she says. They're looking to rent apartments and lofts in high-density, mixed-use housing developments.

But Volk says too often in Michigan, zoning restrictions and building codes hinder those kinds of developments.

And banks are often reluctant to lend money to developers for high-density housing in inner-city areas where there are few other such developments, she says.

Improving abysmal urban schools is a moral imperative for government, which is charged with adequately educating the children who must attend them. But Volk says it won't bring back families to cities.

That's because married couples with children make up less than 25 percent of all households.

"The number of families just aren't out there," Volk said.

The most likely candidates to repopulate cities, she says, are the millennials and empty-nest baby boomers.

"America, as a nation, is changing rapidly," Volk said.

So should our notions about how to prosper from those changes.

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