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Michigan must stop bleeding young talent

Metro Detroit has economic, cultural and entertainment assets to attract young people. Next month, for example, techno fans worldwide will gather at Hart Plaza for Movement 2009. Keeping them here is another story. That's a battle the region and state are losing in the new knowledge economy, as a trip today to Brother Rice High School in Birmingham reminded me.

Teacher Daniel McCarville asked me to speak to three classes of graduating seniors, who understood the problems facing this region better than most adults. It's humbling to speak to teen-agers twice as smart as you are, and half as jaded. Unfortunately for us, most of them plan to leave Michigan after graduating from college.

Asking for a show of hands in the three classes, I counted only 13 of 65 who planned to stick around. A handful more said they would eventually come back, but weather, lack of opportunity and endless beefing by our so-called leaders were cited by others as a reason to bounce. (Not surprisingly, lack of opportunity was the big one.) We can't control the weather, but we can control our public investments. Every student indicated that a healthy urban center would help pull him to an area.

That's one of the many reasons cities matter to the economic development of a state and region. Young workers in the new knowledge economy seek urban areas with walkable neighborhoods, good mass transit and, of course, decent jobs. Unfortunately, Michigan's politicians have been largely clueless about how to attract and retain them, arguing instead over taxes, cutting local revenue sharing and pursuing development policies more fitted to the 1950s. They have failed to make the investments in education and cities that would nurture and attract young talent and make the state competitive. Michigan is one of only four states that spends more on prisons than higher education. Small wonder we're in such a mess.

Many students said they were put off by Detroit's crime rates and the lack of things for young people to do. Still, it was encouraging that they hadn't given up on the city. Every one at least agreed that the region's health and image depended largely on the health and image of its core city — Detroit. They understood that Detroit and its suburbs depend on each other.

They're barely old enough to vote, but the region would be better with them as shotcallers. Let's give them a reason to stay.
