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Regional Development Moving Forward
Posted by Karen Dybis
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So how do you get people to move to Michigan? Once they're here, how do you get them to stay? Does anyone "get it" around here?

Yup. There is a groundswell of activity toward these very goals. City administrators, development companies and non-profit business incubators are busy – trying to shed the past and get on with the future.

So how do you do it? You get advertising. You get creative with what you build. You push hard to attract new residents – and that draws new employers, retailers and more.

In other words, you don't wait for "Detroit" to get better. You make it happen for yourself.

At least, that seems to be the case among cities such as Auburn Hills, Eastpointe, Ann Arbor and many others I have spoken with over recent weeks. While they are respectful of the struggle Detroit is going through – and they are working to help in any way they can – these cities are busy growing and improving.

Most importantly, they are getting the word out there about Michigan...and how the reality can be far different than widespread presumptions.

Take Auburn Hills for example. Most folks around here (and outside of the state) know it mostly as the home base for Chrysler and the Detroit Pistons. Yes, the Palace and the automaker's shiny headquarters are icons of this Oakland County city. But Auburn Hills' officials are aggressively pursuing new opportunities for its business, retail and residential base, said City Manager Pete Auger.

Recent, city officials hired consultants to help them visualize Auburn Hills over the next five years. And the wish list was long – but achievable, Auger said.

Auburn Hills wants a vibrant downtown in addition to the massive mall shopping areas. If it can happen in Ferndale, Royal Oak and Birmingham – other popular cities in Oakland County – why couldn't downtown Auburn Hills become a major draw? It also wants to be known as a college town, tying into Oakland University, Oakland Community College, Cooley law school, Baker College and others. Oh, and city officials want more business to settle there, diversifying the type of industries found in Southeast Michigan as a whole.

Surprisingly, Auburn Hills is only 25 years old, Auger says. Because it is a relatively new city, it is more adaptable than most. It is a vibrant regional player. And its success could serve as the catalyst to get Michigan back on its feet, Auger noted. In fact, the city council recently adopted the tag line: "Honoring the past and building the future."

"We have so much to offer. ... As we come out of this recession's tailspin, we're in a great position to lead," Auger said.

Eastpointe, formerly known as East Detroit, also is working toward a better downtown, focusing on how to get young people living there. It's a long-term improvement project, and the city is working with many consultants. Among them is Scott Clein, who heads the Detroit office of Giffels-Webster Engineers, who is eager to make it happen.

Clein said the city and its partners are finishing up an urban design plan – a document that in detail expresses what the city physically wants to be. The goal is to establish the area around Gratiot and Nine Mile as the downtown, distinguishing it from Anywhere USA. That means staggering the building heights to make it look special. Changing ordinances to allow for sidewalk cafes and outdoor eating. Maybe lowering the speed limit to make vehicles slow down and take notice.

Basically, this is what young people want, Clein said. They want to be close to amenities. They want that urban feel, a mix of different uses like residential, commercial and retail shops within a few feet of one another. In other words, "they want the interaction that comes with living in an urban area," Clein said.

"It really could be a great place to go," Clein said.

And then there's Ann Arbor, which has a huge friend in Ann Arbor SPARK, a non-profit organization. The group is the driving force in establishing the Ann Arbor region as a destination for business expansion, retention, and location.

Last year, Ann Arbor SPARK's economic development efforts to attract and retain businesses in the region and support jobs creation helped to generate more than \$147 million in new investment commitments. The group also assisted companies with the creation and retention of more than 3,200 jobs in the region.

"Ann Arbor's allure is part academic, part entrepreneurial and part quality of life, so SPARK works to support all of those moving parts," said Elizabeth Parkinson, Vice President Marketing and Communications for the non-profit. "With one of the world's leading universities here, it's no surprise that there are smart, talented people who want to live and work in Ann Arbor."

Some of these people are also inspired to start their own businesses, so SPARK has created a fairly robust support system for starting and growing a business in Ann Arbor -- everything from bi-annual Boot Camps to administering a \$16 million pre-seed fund to microloans to talent programs to incubators/ business accelerators, Parkinson said. The Ann Arbor region also works hard to nurture quality of life through vibrant downtown district, good schools, great parks & recreation -- and that's something SPARK can use to attract business and talent to the region and state.

Yahoo! These are cities with self-confidence. Knowledge. And they're moving forward.

Read more: <http://detroit.blogs.time.com/2010/02/17/regional-development-moving-forward/#ixzz0foWh3dgQ>