

Un-Cool Cities

Jennifer Granholm must have been bummed. If she wasn't, she should have been. There was the governor of Michigan in Lansing's "Old Town" district promoting something called Cool Cities. "Michigan's economic future lies in creating vibrant communities that are magnets for people, jobs and opportunity," the Governor said.

"Cool Cities" is a mixed bag of taxpayer-supported grant programs aimed largely at stanching the outbound migration of the state's educated young adults. It is predicated on the shaky notion that Michigan's often clueless municipal politicians and bureaucrats will suddenly "get it." Spending state tax dollars, they will transform their fiefdoms in to cool destinations for young college grads. It's expecting a lot from local pooh-bahs still harboring hopes that if they promise huge tax breaks and public giveaways, some corporation is going to arrive and build—Yes! A new Plant!—employing hundreds of under-educated locals who will manufacture, um, ah, *something*.

Cool Cities is an awkwardly tacit admission that Michigan has cities largely built around the last century's technology and innovations. Yet, Michigan's governor apparently believes, as only a true-blue Democrat can, that government can spend its way to hipness. One of the first challenges of this program is simply defining a cool city. As the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart admitted, he couldn't define pornography, "but I know it when I see it." Apparently many young adults don't see coolness in Michigan.

"Everybody I knew from college, from high school, has moved away. Everybody's gone," says Nathan Forster, 25, who grew up in Troy. A University of Michigan grad now attending law school at Boston College, Nathan intends to stay in Boston after graduation. Thousands of educated 20-somethings like Nathan Forster have concluded Michigan looks best in the rear view mirror. Between 2000 and 2002, over 33 thousand young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 moved out of the Detroit Metro area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The story isn't much better elsewhere in Michigan. Faced with hard census data and the even harder realities of a global economy, Governor Granholm had to become proactive.

Experts are not optimistic about Michigan's Cool Cities campaign. Dr. Bill Frey, a demographer and sociologist at the University of Michigan and the Brookings Institution, notes we've always been a nation of pioneers searching for the cutting edge. Michigan was at the cutting edge—100 years ago. "Michigan is never going to be a hot spot anymore like it was in the heyday of the auto industry," Frey predicts. "It's in that part of the country that is not going to see that kind of rebound. The best you can hope for is not to have a huge hemorrhaging of the population."

Adventure, excitement, fun, opportunity, low rents, good public transportation—these are the terms Michigan's young professionals use in explaining why they left, or want to. "There's nothing to do here. It's very suburban," is the blunt assessment of Ann Trakhman, 24, of West Bloomfield, now working in marketing in Ford's Kansas City office. "There are nice things here, but there's not a central area where everything is located," she notes.

Kelly Harris, 27, co-manager of a retail shop in the Somerset Collection, shares many of Ann Trakhman's views. "It's not that there's nothing cool," she says. "It's just too far apart. Nothing is within walking distance. You have to worry about transportation, who's going to drive, blah, blah, blah."

Good public transportation is a must for luring young adults to a community. City leaders sometimes forget young people are "low income." Many don't have a car. "Not having a car is

basically where my disposable income comes from,” explains 23 year-old Megan Cook. The Grandville, Michigan native and U of M graduate now lives in the trendy, pedestrian-friendly Williamsburg (“Billburg”) section of Brooklyn, New York. “I can afford to go out and have a three dollar cappuccino and buy a record and go to a show in part because I don’t have to pay for a car,” she says. She believes not having a car benefits the local economy. “I have this discretionary income I can use to support these local businesses and that’s something else that not having affordable transportation takes away from.”

Nightlife is important to twenty-somethings. Often, it’s how they develop relationships. Young adults are attracted to cities where entertainment, dining, local arts and culture resources are clustered within easy walking distance of affordable housing or it’s accessible by safe, reliable public transportation.

Bert Sperling, creator of the “Best Places” Web site (www.bestplaces.net) and author of *Cities Ranked and Rated*, suggests towns should develop “incubator” districts, and then get out of the way. “It will create sort of an island of these young people and you’ll have to let them do what they do best, which is to create something out of nothing,” Sperling says. It’s similar to ideas championed by “*Creative Class*” community development guru Richard Florida.

If Michigan’s economic development officials want to understand what young adults are seeking, they should explore college towns. Students discover clustered unique little businesses, and they like them. Nathan Forster recalls a time when U of M students picketed the new Starbucks franchise, partly because they saw a threat to local coffee shops. “There’s nothing hip about going to Starbucks anymore,” Forster says. “It’s like going to a Bennigan’s or a Chili’s. You know what you’re gonna get.”

Ann Trakhman, the Ford junior marketing specialist, gets excited as she imagines somehow transplanting the entire University of Michigan campus so it’s near Birmingham—with its little shops, and Royal Oak—with its nightlife, and the campus would then be close to the Somerset Collection in Troy. “That’s every twenty-something girl’s dream come true,” she says. Sorry, Clawson. You’re toast.

Megan Cook notes college kids experience density of lifestyle resources and they seek it when searching for a “cool city” after graduation. “The accessibility factor is really hard to overestimate,” she says. “The convenience factor is huge.”

Broadband high-speed Internet access is also huge with young people. “Young people now sort of expect it. If it isn’t there, it’s a real turnoff,” observes Bert Sperling. At the state level at least, Michigan is showing significant broadband strides. The MiWiFi project is enabling WiFi (WiFi is wireless high-speed Internet access service) capability in state parks, recreation sites and rest areas. Visitors who see people using WiFi along Michigan’s public beaches, state parks and rest stops may start a buzz that is priceless.

Detroit is moving in the right direction on WiFi, too. WiFi at Cobo Center, Hart Plaza and other public venues will be a significant—and cool—attraction for conventioners and visitors. Other Michigan cities can benefit from WiFi by offering free access in city parks and along streets where pedestrians might linger on benches.

Interestingly, sunshine isn’t a common denominator of youth magnet cities. Nor is it necessary to be the center of some mega-industry. Nathan Forster notes many young people assume, often correctly, if a city is jumping an entry-level job can be found.

Un-Cool Cities

Where are the cool cities, the hubs of hip? Austin, Chicago, New York, Boston, San Diego, San Francisco (naturally) and Omaha are mentioned frequently by twenty-somethings. Omaha Nebraska? Yep. The youthful “indie” rock music scene is flourishing there. Haven’t heard about it? Fact: urban coolness never derives from government programs and press releases. Cool is about personal experience, word of mouth and buzz.

“I’m skeptical,” is Megan Cook’s response to Michigan’s Cool Cities project. “I don’t know if it’s the kind of thing you can force.” Nathan Forster concurs. “Young people don’t like to listen to advertising. They trust more what their friends say.”

Bill Frey and Bert Sperling agree the “Cool Cities” campaign is of dubious value. “It could be part of a broader strategy but I think by itself alone, it’s not likely to have the intended outcome,” Frey predicts. Sperling notes the elusiveness of cool: “If you have to say something is cool, basically, it’s not.” Frey has this cautionary observation about young adults: “Most cities only get to rent them, they don’t get to own them. They’re very mobile people.”

A lively music scene is a given in truly cool cities. Omaha and Austin are renowned for their local music. Detroit has long been a hotbed of music. The Motown stars, Bob Seger, Eminem, White Stripes—all originated here. Detroit has a global reputation for techno music that sprang from the Motor City, yet a lot more could be done to cluster local music venues to create the nightlife density twenty-somethings crave.

Let’s fantasize momentarily about Detroit becoming a cool city—again. We’ll conveniently ignore the political and economic obstacles. First, we put a Jumbotron video screen at the foot of Woodward. It will feature an endless stream of slick videos and slide shows showcasing what’s happening in town. This high tech attention grabber tells visitors that fun, cool things are happening here. Free downtown public WiFi access can offer more details on where they can have fun and spend money.

The entire waterfront area along Jefferson Ave. between downtown and Belle Isle will be embraced as an ideal location for a nightlife district. There will be sustained effort to create nightlife *density*. The People Mover will service Jefferson Ave. and extend north along Woodward with stops in the stadiums/Fox area, Orchestra Hall/Medical Center and Wayne State/Cultural Center.

Building on the success of Detroit’s international techno music rep and summer concerts in Chene Park, newly enlightened leaders will embrace the entertainment value of the riverfront and Belle Isle. Cutting edge music clubs, unique bars, boutiques and coffee shops will be encouraged to locate alongside the newly established River Walk. Chain bars and restaurants need not apply. Plentiful patio heaters will entice patrons to linger after summer disappears.

Lofts with affordable rents will be encouraged, perhaps even subsidized with tenant restrictions to discourage mere bargain-hunters. Young professionals working in entrepreneurial companies might receive preferential treatment.

City officials will quit paying lip service to our potential visitor mega-magnet in the water—Belle Isle. This truly unique jewel will be transformed into a year-round recreation/leisure destination. The People Mover will become part of a regional light rail system and the Jefferson Ave. line will have a stop at the Belle Isle Bridge. Frequent shuttle buses will serve the island

Un-Cool Cities

areas set aside for activities. A top-notch beach will be created on the south end, facing the Detroit skyline. Casual restaurants and pubs will sprout like trillium.

The Detroit Police will become proactive in ensuring the Belle Isle/riverfront nightlife enclave is truly safe. Cops on bikes and blades will send a message to muggers and street people.

There will be plentiful, free Wi-Fi service and free outdoor electrical outlets to make it easy for wireless gadget-users to re-charge while they linger on the waterfront. The People Mover will make it easy to check out the action around the Fox, the Wayne State/Cultural Center or Royal Oak, farther up the line.

It's a nice daydream.

If Michigan wants to regain street cred, government-contrived hipness, as envisioned in the Cool Cities program, is unlikely to be the yellow brick road to the Emerald City. The money and effort might be better spent on improving public transportation and revising the state laws, local ordinances and general public bureaucracy that impede the “incubator” zones championed by experts like Richard Florida and Bert Sperling.

The entire Detroit region, for example, could quickly benefit from a “party express” public bus service providing dinner-to-closing time shuttle service between park-and-ride lots and nightlife districts in Detroit, Royal Oak, Pontiac and others which may emerge over time. The park-and-ride lots could feature heated, well-lit passenger shelters with Hi Def video monitors and surround-sound promoting current nightlife attractions.

Michigan boosters everywhere might improve the coolness odds by encouraging affordable housing near or at least accessible to “creative class” enclaves. If you build it—then get out of the way—maybe they will come.