



Gov. Snyder spot on in bid to welcome immigrants

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By Phil Power

Gov. Rick Snyder likes to describe himself as “one tough nerd.” He is also widely and accurately regarded as a numbers guy.

And his annual State of the State speech last week was, indeed, true to type. There was none of the soaring rhetoric of his predecessor, Gov. Jennifer Granholm. Our governor would never win an oratory contest, and I suspect he knows it.

But instead, what we got was a down-to-earth, wide-ranging list of topics, from campaign promises kept and initiatives accomplished to some forward-looking priorities. Snyder is clearly, if unofficially, running for a second term, and the speech offered an advance look at what his re-election campaign will look like.



For me, the most interesting part of the speech had to do with his emphasis on how immigrants coming to Michigan can be an essential part of our state’s economic development strategy.

To his credit, Snyder has been talking about welcoming immigrants ever since his first State of the State back in 2011. This time, however, he called for creating a “Michigan Office for New Americans,” to help educated, talented and ambitious immigrants, and he urged federal approval for a visa program to help provide a path to citizenship for entrepreneurial immigrants who come with at least \$500,000 in capital to invest in new businesses.

Indeed, the metrics of what immigrants have done here are impressive – even to a numbers guy. From 1995-2005, one quarter of all high-tech startups in the U.S. were founded by non-native-born entrepreneurs, fully half of all such firms in Silicon Valley.

In Michigan, where only six percent of our population today is foreign born, a radically disproportionate 32 percent of high-tech startups from 1990 to 2005 were founded by immigrants!

In fact, nearly one-sixth of all businesses started in Michigan between 1996 and 2007 were launched by immigrants; in all, those 2,276 firms generated \$1.5 billion in one year alone.

Clearly, we need more of this. The Michigan Office for New Americans idea follows past steps taken by the Snyder Administration to encourage immigrant-driven economic success.

At Snyder's urging, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) has provided financial support for the Global Talent Retention Initiative of Michigan, a pioneering international student program. It's aimed at encouraging the best of the more than 25,000 foreign-born students at Michigan universities, many of them studying engineering and math, to stay after graduation.

The governor's administration has developed a series of online professional licensing guides designed to help new Americans through the thicket of regulations and requirements.

Now, his Office for New Americans is a logical next step. Former State Rep. Steve Tobocman (D-Detroit) is a very bright guy who started Global Detroit and has been a consistent and effective advocate for immigrants as drivers of Michigan's economy.

Tobocman says the new office "sends a signal that Governor Snyder is serious, that he is committed to making our state welcoming, and that the complexities of the field ... require full-time attention and coordination."

Complexities are right. One example: Michigan has filed an application to be designated an EB-5 visa application center, something that would allow the state to reach out to prospective investor immigrants. Makes plenty of sense, yes?

True — but bizarrely, the feds have placed management of the program in the Department of Homeland Security, not the Department of Commerce. Unraveling that bureaucratic snafu is bound to take some of the governor's attention.

The solution to Michigan's most pressing problem – how to remake Detroit into an economic engine rather than a sinkhole – has much to do with immigration policy. One of the key priorities for a revitalized Detroit is increasing the number of residents, and it's plain that immigration is the only population growth strategy that has worked in any significant way in years.

The growing Hispanic community in Southwest Detroit, the Middle Eastern one in Dearborn and multi-ethnic Hamtramck are all envied by struggling neighborhoods throughout Michigan.

Back in 2011, Tobocman told me "nothing is more powerful to remaking Detroit as a center of innovation, entrepreneurship and population growth than embracing and increasing immigrant populations and the entrepreneurial culture and global connections they bring."

I suspect Gov. Snyder has heard that message.

And looking through his State of the State speech gives the impression he has been listening to other far-sighted folks, as well. The governor wants another \$65 million in support for a state-run, free pre-K program for poor and vulnerable four year-olds. He wants to explore the idea of year-round schools, where kids don't forget much of last year's learning over a long summer vacation. And he wants the legislature to finish a new teacher evaluation system.

Two weeks ago, I went after the governor for signing a bill that perpetuates the disgraceful amount of secret “dark money” sloshing into Michigan political campaigns. Signing that bill was a bad decision.

But there’s much to admire in Rick Snyder’s State of the State speech. We have no idea yet how the campaign for governor will unfold over the next 10 months. But the markers Snyder laid down last week offer a powerful case for what he’s done as a nerdy numbers guy who happens to be our governor.

Former newspaper publisher and University of Michigan Regent Phil Power is a longtime observer of Michigan politics and economics. He is also the founder and chairman of the Center for Michigan, a nonprofit, bipartisan centrist think-and-do tank, designed to cure Michigan’s dysfunctional political culture; the Center publishes Bridge Magazine. The opinions expressed here are Power’s own and do not represent the official views of the Center. He welcomes your comments at ppower@thecenterformichigan.net.