

# National Journal

## THE NEXT AMERICA | ECONOMY

### Michigan as Midwest Silicon Valley?

Immigration is considered "part of the solution for our economic rebirth," says the director of Global Detroit, a group that's working to revitalize the region.

17 January 2014

Ted Hesson, Fusion



Immigrants undeterred by Michigan's economic decline and weather can rejuvenate the region, a group says. (Joshua Lott/Getty Images)

Michigan can be the Silicon Valley of the Midwest.

Wait a sec, don't click away just yet. We'll explain.

Michigan has taken an economic beating since the 1990s. The declining auto industry set off a chain reaction that crippled the state economy, and in 2008, the recession hit particularly hard, triggering a high foreclosure rate.

There's been one big bright spot in recent years, however: immigration.

"We were looking for answers," said Steve Tobocman, the director of Global Detroit, a group that's working to revitalize the Detroit region. "We saw immigration as part of the solution for our economic rebirth."

Michigan was the one state in the country to see its population drop from 2000 to 2010. Yet the number of foreign-born residents actually increased.

And foreign-born entrepreneurs were hard at work. While immigrants only made up 5.3

percent of Michigan's foreign-born population in 2010, they represented 10.4 percent of all business owners that year.

Immigration streams have been particularly generous to Michigan, at least in terms of highly skilled newcomers. The state ranks 11th in the U.S. in terms of the share of foreign-born population with a bachelor's degree or more.

Not every state has access to the same pool of workers, so Michigan's example might be difficult to duplicate in other struggling Midwestern cities. All immigrants can spur economic activity, but it certainly helps when the newcomers are doctors, lawyers and scientists.

Still, for Michigan, the tech sector represents one of the biggest successes: 32.5 percent of tech startups in Michigan between 1990 and 2005 had an immigrant founder.

People like Steve Tobocman see that as an opportunity. He spoke on Tuesday at an event held by the American Immigration Council for staffers on Capitol Hill. The idea: give politicians some suggestions about what they can do in their home districts, since federal immigration reform is looking pretty bleak these days.

His organization is already working on several projects meant to draw and retain immigrant talent in the state, international students in particular. Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican, supports the effort, as well.

Those students could become future entrepreneurs, but federal immigration policy makes it a challenge for them to stay after graduation. In fact, foreign students are asked to sign a waiver guaranteeing that they'll leave after they complete their education, Tobocman said.

He wants to change that.

"We believe that you ought to look at amending the federal immigration system to allow immigrants to go to places like Detroit and Michigan where they are most needed," he said. "Whether that is through a special visa that goes to cities that have lost population or seen high unemployment...or whether it's looking at new ways with existing laws."

Michigan serves as an example of what can be done on the state and local level to draw immigrant talent through welcoming programs and state-level lobbying efforts, but Tobocman is hoping for bigger policy change.

"Right now our federal system is really in the way for our growth and prosperity," he said.

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