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New leaders can't shrink from Michigan realities

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You don't need a crystal ball to see Michigan's future. You just need to know that there are now about 22,000 more ninth-graders than fifth-graders in state schools. The statewide birth rate fell 3.4% from 2007 to 2008, and is down nearly 21% compared with 1990.

This means that, absent an unlikely immigration tsunami, Michigan will continue to shrink -- and to diminish relative to a nation that will see slow but steady population growth.

Shrinkage already is a huge issue for the city of Detroit, but you don't hear it discussed much in Detroit's shrinking suburbs or across our shrinking state. As a percentage, the statewide numbers will not be nearly as dramatic as those in Detroit, but the impact will be significant in a nation that keeps growing. The decline -- Michigan now gets to 10 million people only if you generously round up our population number -- means less political clout and more school closings but, theoretically, lower unemployment if the state continues to gain jobs while losing people.

Michigan, you may have noticed, led the nation in job growth among states during July, although it remains far from regaining the million-plus jobs that have disappeared from the state in the past decade.

With this shrinking reality in mind, the incoming leaders of Michigan, to be chosen Nov. 2, need to be thinking about a strategy of Three R's -- retention, rightsizing and renewal -- not unlike the one Mayor Dave Bing is trying to implement in Detroit.

• **Retention:** What is Michigan doing to keep people here who can make a difference for the future, who *are* different from the shoulders-to-the-wheel generations who built Michigan on their backs in the 20th Century?

These keepers would include young, college-educated citizens; entrepreneurs who want to start something in Michigan, and established employers, who probably get an offer a month to move their jobs elsewhere.

Retention should include incentives for new graduates, especially those from state-supported universities, to stay in Michigan.

And yes, Michigan can never stop searching for new employers, but there also must be strategies for protecting what we have, encouraging natives to become employers and supporting those who export Michigan products and services, starting with agriculture.

Retention also means protecting the resources here that will be vital to the future, especially Michigan's waters. But it extends to the smartest use of empty land, too, as the population drops.

• **Rightsizing:** This can't be limited to Detroit. But it's the toughest kind of change, as anyone connected with the auto industry in recent years

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knows too well.

Can shrinking communities, even counties, continue to deliver the same services, operate their own little school systems and take care forever of present and past employees? Do fewer citizens really need just as much governing? Are we set up to meet the needs of an aging population instead of a growing one?

The Gerald Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan released survey results last month showing that 78% of local officials across the state report declining tax revenues. More than half of the largest local governments expect to lay off people (in many cases, more people) in the year ahead.

But instead of struggling to support government as is, it's past time to be looking at government as it should be in a state that is not what it once was.

• **Renewal:** There's nothing wrong with being a shrinking state if Michigan also is a smarter state, an innovative state, a state with fewer people but more of them working and less government but more efficient services.

Bad as things are here, I am always struck, as I travel the state, by the depth of feeling for Michigan, the passion for the place, the willingness to work to make it better. There's a reservoir to be tapped there by leaders people can believe in.

The future is clear: It's in the numbers. The question is whether our new leaders will rise to it and retain what we need, rightsize what we have and renew the spirit that made Michigan great.

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