

← Back (<https://lansingcitypulse.newsbank.com/browse/MLCP/2003/september/24/1>)

Nightlife in Lansing? If the governor has her way

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By DANIEL STURM

Imagine a city with 800,000 square feet of empty office space and hardly any sign of public life after 5 o'clock.

Welcome to downtown Lansing.

Here comes Gov. Jennifer Granholm to the rescue. On Sept. 19, Granholm launched a "cool cities" initiative to attract hip, well-educated young techies and professionals and to prevent Michigan cities from turning into ghost towns.

The capital city has reached a critical period in its development. Between 1990-2000, the demographic of 20-to 34-year-old residents declined by 17,300. And Lansing's ability to replace retiring workers is five times worse than Ann Arbor's and six times worse than Grand Rapids'.

In her latest project, Granholm has asked the mayors of Michigan's 30 largest cities, from Alpena to Ypsilanti, to name representatives to the statewide panel and submit them to her office by Oct. 15. She's also asking mayors from more than 250 Michigan cities to establish local advisory groups, to build a similar discussion.

Gene Townsend, a builder of environmentally friendly homes in mid-Michigan, said he welcomes Granholm's project, although he wished she'd chosen a different title, such as "progressive cities."

"Progressive cities are places that have already embraced a pattern of success. They're where you can live, work, shop or go to school in a close-knit environment. Lansing is really far away from that."

Townsend, who contracts for Coulter Builders in Okemos and is president of the Mid-Michigan Environmental Action Council, said Lansing's cityscape is a prime example of post WW II urban development trends. Since 1945 zoning laws have emphasized the regional specialization, separating where people work, live and shop.

The downside of this trend is that there are very few "mixed-use" neighborhoods. Building a studio apartment above a commercial business in Lansing is a difficult task, due to the many legal obstacles.

Townsend pointed to other Michigan cities that have managed to keep their downtown areas vital, such as Grand Rapids.

In 2001, Grand Rapids embraced new planning principles by rewriting its master plan. The city held more than 100 public meetings to solicit comments, ideas, and opinions from local residents about planning, urban sprawl, and land use. Residents recognized their right to exist in a healthy, supportive, diverse, and sustainable environment. Some stressed the need to design buildings and communities that have long-term value.

Lansing Mayor Tony Benavides said he supports Granholm's initiative. Benavides has assigned his chief assistant, David Wiener, to form a local advisory board of volunteers for the cool cities initiative. Benavides believes Lansing's key problem is that there are too few dining and cultural activities downtown. "A five-star restaurant would be fantastic, and we also need a disco for the youth," Benavides said.

State Sen. Virg Bernero, Benavides' opponent in the Nov. 4 election, also called the cool cities initiative "very important."

"It's my vision, and they just put another name on it." Bernero said Lansing needs more art events, family entertainment and housing if it is to become a hip city. "Had I been on City Council for 22 years [like Benavides], I'd already have such a group up and running. It isn't going to take me two decades to get motivated."

Rex LaMore, the director for community and economic development at MSU's Center for Urban Affairs, said that communities need three main qualities in order to be "cool" and economically successful: "A high talent-pool, a good technological infra-structure, and a cultural environment that's extremely tolerant of different peoples and interests."

The Williamstown resident said Lansing has an economic profile that is similar to other higher education communities, but which unfortunately lacks cultural profile. Lansing leaders should do more to diversify the city's cultural entertainment base. LaMore emphasized housing as another important condition for attracting the "creative class," since it is a resident's greatest single consumer investment. "I don't fault the two mayoral candidates for giving so much attention to the issue."

LaMore said he's met with Department of Labor and Economic Development staff to offer some insights on the development of an urban assistance plan. Urban Core Mayors, an association of 12 Michigan core city mayors, chaired by Grand Rapids Mayor John H. Logie, will also offer the state department their input.

Patrick Hudson, the director of Urban Options, an East Lansing-based environmental think-tank, said Granholm's initiative offers a great opportunity to market often neglected "sustainable values." Sustainable

development initiatives aim to build a city's overall well-being by supporting a range of issues, including environmental friendliness, good schools, health care costs and socio- cultural diversity.

Hudson stressed the importance of clever marketing. "They say you need to send the message 27 times for it to stick. So how many more times will it take before people actually realize that sustainable ideas are cool?"

The Urban Options director said he already has thoughts about how Lansing could lead the way, through marketing sustainability themes. "It would be a very cool thing to market, if the city could prove that the air is getting cleaner," Hudson said. He pointed out that Lansing recently joined the clean cities coalition and has begun using bio-based fuels for its fleets. As an example, Hudson suggested to market the testimony of a child with less frequent asthma problems, who says that the City of Lansing is "cool."

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