

Mon, Sep 29, 2003

Revitalized Milwaukee good for us

On the Web:

The full text of Gov. Jim Doyle's "Grow Wisconsin" plan is available at:

<http://www.wisgov.state.wi.us>

Gov. Jim Doyle wants to help Milwaukee to help Wisconsin.

One of the tenets of Doyle's "Grow Wisconsin" economic agenda is to build a world-class urban center in Milwaukee.

So what?

Why should central Wisconsin care about Milwaukee?

More important, how will giving money to develop Milwaukee benefit the economy here?

A confluence of interstate highways in Milwaukee's downtown, the Marquette Interchange is the heart that pumps commerce from the southeast into the arteries and capillaries throughout the state, and Doyle wants to expedite work on the interchange.

That's only the start. A better economy in Milwaukee has a peripheral benefit to central Wisconsin. Populous southeastern Wisconsin represents the most potential for rapid growth, said Randy Cray, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point economics professor. A healthier Milwaukee metro area means more jobs and income in the state, which can alleviate budget shortfalls, he said.

A thriving urban center lures college grads and young professionals. It's a magnet for larger companies, which can attract better employees with a city's recreational opportunities.

Wisconsin has educated more than 70,000 college graduates over a 10-year span who now live outside the state, according to the "Grow Wisconsin" report. Wisconsin ranks behind other Midwestern states in graduate retention and average pay, which are related.

Wisconsin is No. 30 nationally for average pay, nearly \$5,000 per year below the national average of \$36,200. Neighbors with stronger urban centers - Minnesota (No. 14), Michigan (No. 12) and Illinois (No. 7) - are far above.

West of us, the Twin Cities are buoying Minnesota's economy with a knowledge-based economy rated tops worldwide in 2002 by Robert Huggins Associates, a United Kingdom consulting firm.

The cities are "the region with the most balanced and equitable knowledge-based economy for sustaining overall levels of growth and prosperity," the study said. "Although it does not dominate any particular sector of economic activity, it has a strong spread of activity across key knowledge-based economic sectors."

Milwaukee is dominated by manufacturing, skilled trades and transportation. In 2002, about 250,000 people were employed in those sectors. Close to 22 percent of the metro-area workforce was in manufacturing, well above the national average of 14.9 percent.

In brain vs. brawn, brains are winning.

More professional jobs mean better pay and graduate retention. To increase professional jobs, begin with a thriving cultural center. That's what Milwaukee should be with its lakefront setting, access to colleges and museums, sporting events, music venues and world-class cultural fairs every summer.

Doyle wants to work with business, labor and education groups to develop Milwaukee "as a dense, attractive urban environment that will contribute to the entire state." Programs include redeveloping Milwaukee's downtown and the Menomonee Valley - once warehouses and factories for the railyards and nearby docks, but now vacant - improving public school graduation rates and creating more capital funding sources.

Let's not turn Doyle's plan into a north vs. south, urban vs. rural battle.
Yes, central Wisconsin officials must work together to ensure the region gets its fair share. And nothing less.

But instead of demonizing Milwaukee, value our biggest city.
Consider the alternative. If Milwaukee continues its slow decline, the entire state will pay. That we cannot afford.

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