

**CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS**

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Commentary

## **Opinion: 2 decades of evidence gives governor answer to growing Michigan's population**

By Megan Owens



Over the past few months, headlines in Crain's Detroit Business noted, "[Michigan ranks next to last in population growth as young workers look elsewhere](#)," which may have led the governor to ask, "[How to grow Michigan's stagnant population? Whitmer forms council to tackle the problem.](#)"

I can save the Growing Michigan Together Council a lot of time. All it takes is a look through the last twenty years of Crain's headlines.

Back in 2004, Mary Kramer gave the council its answer: "[Public transit is key to region's growth](#)," sharing that she's "worried that young college graduates are giving up on Southeast Michigan, in part because they don't feel there's opportunity here. In surveys and at forums, they tell us we need more of the big-city feel they find in Chicago, Atlanta or even Washington."

An article also in 2004 made it clear that, "[Mass transit must become a priority](#)," explaining that, "Poor transportation dooms Detroit to high unemployment rates. It makes the region less attractive to younger residents who are accustomed to getting around without cars on their college campuses."

Another headline in 2007 provided the answer: "[Stores, transit, walkability: To attract millennials, appeal to their desires](#)." One section spotlighted "Technology and transit" quoting Lou Glazer that, "Michigan needs to look forward and follow the lead of other cities such as Portland, Seattle and Atlanta, which endured weak economies but began to concentrate on young talent and eventually pulled out of the muck."

Young people themselves provided the answer multiple times in 2009. As explained in "[Millennial congress goal: Help area move beyond an automotive economy](#)," "At a series of community conversations with city officials and young residents of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, there was general recognition of the need to move beyond the automotive economy and get a more reliable, regional transit system."

As did Great Lakes Urban Exchange in the article, "[GLUEing together a region: Campaign asks young professionals what it will take to make them stay here](#)." Of 82 initial responses to GLUE's "I Will Stay If ..." campaign, "the biggest trends here in Detroit were mass transit, greenways and regional government."

It was repeated in 2013 when the first answer in "[10 takeaways from Governor \(Snyder\)'s meeting with Detroit young professionals](#)" was "MASS TRANSIT-Capable people can't get to work; reliable, effective public transportation will reduce unemployment."

And again in 2016 as Kurt Metzger explained in, "[Young talent continues to flee Michigan](#)" — "Cities like Denver and Salt Lake City are investing in regional transit. These regions are getting the importance of investing in infrastructure. Millennials want bike lanes and they want mass transit, all these things we keep hearing from millennials."

Ron Fournier repeated it again in 2018, asking "[After failed Amazon bid, are we back to our old ways?](#)." He wrote, "Young workers, the backbone of any city's future, don't want to be tied to their cars, and millennials want to live downtown, or at least be able to visit the urban core." He quoted Mayor Duggan that the region's lack of mobility "is being used against us by other cities in the Midwest every single day."

The best time to make bold transit investments would have been twenty years ago. The second best time is now.

Time for Governor Whitmer's administration to stop treating public transit as a "nice-to-have" that maybe they'll get around to someday. Time to make a billion dollar investment in a world-class transit system.

First, invest in local bus operations to shore up Michigan's existing transit services, most of which have been limping along on crumbs of funding for decades, unable to pay competitive enough wages to maintain a consistent workforce. Then invest in fast, frequent, rapid transit along dense corridors like Woodward, Michigan, Grand River, and Washtenaw avenues, supporting the vibrant walkable car-optional communities so many young people are seeking. And then connect college towns like Ann Arbor, East Lansing and Kalamazoo together with the vibrant city centers of Detroit, Grand Rapids, Traverse City and beyond, so our brilliant college students (most who lack cars) have convenient opportunities to experience the beautiful diversity of places our state offers, making it more likely they'll choose to stay here.

It doesn't take rocket science, or another poll, survey, or council.

What it takes is state leaders making the commitment and investment to finally provide what young people want. Otherwise, we'll be stuck reading unfulfilled headlines as people flee Michigan for another two decades.

*Megan Owens is a Detroit and executive director of Transportation Riders United.*

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