

Brought to you by:



"First & Foremost," April 3, 2008

Are you a thermometer or a thermostat?

By Ron Kitchens
Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Michigan First

One of my passions is fly-fishing, which I enjoy not so much for the fish as for the experience. Truth be told, I rarely catch anything worth keeping.

No, I enjoy fly-fishing because, most of the time, you see the fish and then use a combination of skill, equipment and luck to try to catch it. I say you see the fish, but that is only if you are wearing polarized glasses.

With the times we are facing and with what we have seen in the past few years, maybe it is time that we put on our own polarized glasses and look at the real Michigan - not the superficial one that seems to be the focal point of the nation's pundits of negativism.

Now, do not get me wrong, some of the perceived negativism is indeed reality. What I have a problem with is the constant barrage of people who are human thermometers. They just check the temperature and do nothing about it.

What we need are human thermostats, people who not only know the temperature but also take action to bring change to meet their needs, wants and desires. So with the clarity that is only gained with polarized shades, let us look at where we are and where we should be.

What is immediately visible is that we truly are a state of abundance. Some of our wealth of abundance is portable, such as our people, technology and capital. Other areas are not so portable, like location, natural resources and public infrastructure.

Unfortunately we are losing a large portion of our portable abundances. Last year, two people left Michigan for every person who came. We also continue to be a large exporter of both ideas and the capital that goes with it.

We must stem this tide if we are to have the capacity to support and utilize our nonmobile resources.

As we continue to gain clarity through our new glasses, we also see a state desperate for change. In any given month, I receive more than a dozen studies, newsletters and notices from groups that have made a commitment that they are going to lead the state to change. These groups range from ultraconservative think tanks to academic organizations to those so liberal I have to check my wallet for fear it was emptied while I read.

The two things that each of these change groups have in common is that 1) they all believe that they have discovered the one "right" way to solve Michigan's woes, and 2) they have obviously not even spoken or listened to each other.

Now, do not get me wrong, I admire commitment to one's beliefs. The explorer Cortez had so much belief in his mission that when he arrived in what is now Mexico, he burned his ships so that his crew would understand that there was no return via the old ways.

If Michigan is going to reach the point that we truly are going to fully utilize our resources, we must begin to talk amongst ourselves about the path forward.

Is this going to be easy or pretty? No. But will it be worth it? Absolutely.

Therefore, what is holding us back, aside from our belief that there is only one correct way to economic success, is the lack of commitment to openly and passionately discuss the problems that Michigan faces and possible solutions.

It seems that many of us believe that a few people will craft solutions in back rooms that will be heartily supported by the masses and we will all then go dancing into prosperity. I think we can agree that no one group has all the answers.

One of my other passions is the sport of rugby, which I had the privilege of playing for many years. One of the great traditions of rugby is that following the match, the home team hosts the visitors for food and beer following the match.

Can you imagine competing with every fiber in your being against another team and then spending the evening socializing with them? Well, that is what happens on any given weekend in rugby clubhouses all across the globe.

How hard would it have been for you to be on the 2007 Portugal World Cup team to spend time socializing with the New Zealand team that just beat you on the pitch (field) by a score of 108 to 7? Not very difficult if you embrace respect and admiration for those who choose to participate in the battle.

We must embrace this same spirit if we are to regain prosperity and thrive in the future.

How much better would our state be if we decided to no longer just complain about East versus West politics?

How much more vibrant would our economy be if we quit competing for public funds for our colleges and universities and just give them all an equal percentage of funding and let the market determine success? How much stronger would our state be if all political discussions did not begin with references to political party, caucuses or re-election?

So if I offer to buy the beer and cook the brats, how about we all agree to come together to discuss our ideas for prosperity and develop a plan together to go forward? After all, that is where we should be - together. I will even loan you my cool new shades

Ron Kitchens, www.RonKitchens.com, is CEO of Southwest Michigan First and the general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Fund. He is the author of the soon-to-be-released book "Community Capitalism" and a frequent speaker on economic growth.

Read "The Community Capitalist," the new blog from Ron Kitchens and Southwest Michigan First, at www.mlive.com/businessreview/western.