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Invest in the greatness of tomorrow

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Believe it can be done. When you believe something can be done, really believe, your mind will find the ways to do it. Believing a solution paves the way to solution.
~ David Schwartz

I have had an interesting past few weeks; business has taken me some pretty dramatically different places like Sydney, Chicago and Mackinac Island.

Although these places could not be more different, one thing struck me that they all had in common. Faced with adversity, they chose to do large, great, generational projects that served as catalysts to future prosperity as opposed to small incremental ones that only served to preserve the status quo.

In Sydney for instance, they built the iconic Sydney Opera House, not because the space on which it sits was cheap or somebody donated it, but because the inhabitants of Sydney were building an iconic image that would forever define their city. The arts that take place in the buildings are almost secondary to the impact of the sense of place they themselves create.

Closer to home, we find Mackinac Island and its Grand Hotel. With the exception of the Motown "Hitsville USA" museum in Detroit, there may not be a more Michigan-ionic building in the state. But the Grand has not always led the charmed life it now seems to have; the first half of its life was a struggle. If not for the commitment of the people that call the Island home, it would have been sold for the value of its building materials on several occasions.

In our own backyard is the Great American City: Chicago. I spent this past weekend giving my brother and his family the nickel tour of the city and was struck by how blessed we are that great leaders 100 years ago focused on creating a real sense of place. Not only are the facilities and sites developed to serving the needs of the community and millions of visitors, they also serve as a socioeconomic bridge for the community. On any given day at the Field Museum, named for its founder Marshall Field,

you will find international tourists mingling with inner-city school kids and Gold Coast bluebloods.

It also strikes me that, of these cities and their iconic facilities, most were built or rebuilt in tough economic times, much like we are experiencing today. Maybe the leaders in these thriving places intended them to serve as beacons of hope for their people. Or, maybe they realized that leadership is about action today to produce results tomorrow.

So many times, we, as leaders, are like the African proverb that talks of the lion that spends all day hunting and eating mice instead of gazelles. Because of his diet of mice, which take the lion more energy to catch and eat than the sustenance produces, he starves to death.

We have time to redevelop our communities, state and nation, but, if we are going to serve the future, we must seek to be and do great, not just get by on little incremental things that will never produce greatness.

When thinking about what it takes to achieve greatness, I am reminded of one of my favorite Ronald Reagan quotes: "Some may try and tell us that this is the end of an era. But what they overlook is that in America, every day is a new beginning. For this is the land that has never become, but is always in the act of becoming."

Regardless of your or my political persuasion, I think we can agree that President Reagan loved America and what we stand for: the opportunity to achieve greatness. I truly love America, it is the only place in the world that the opportunity for my life story is possible -- but with that opportunity comes a price.

I believe that the price of the opportunity we have all been given to live in this truly blessed land is a response to look inside our own hearts and listen to the call of the future to invest in the greatness of tomorrow.

Ron Kitchens is president and CEO of Southwest Michigan First and an exclusive columnist for Business Review.