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## Looking into the Crystal Pineapple

By Ron Kitchens

I have written well over 100 columns in my life, and it is a rare case when my editor asks me to write on a particular topic. Well, as you have undoubtedly deduced by now, the subject of this issue is looking into the future. And I have to be honest, this one had me stumped.

In a lame attempt to gain inspiration, I went to the ever-trusted Google to see what others were predicting for 2008. I swear I was just looking for inspiration, not to plagiarize. What I discovered was that there are a lot of Top 10 predictions and most are divided into two camps: psychic predictions and celebrity stalkers. Neither of these are much help in writing a business column, but it is good to know that there is a consensus that Brad and Angelina will be adopting the children of an entire village and moving them to their palatial new digs in Atlantis (the lost continent, not the tacky tourist village). But I digress.

Per my editor's assignment, I stared deeply into a crystal ball. Well, technically it was a crystal pineapple, as I do not own a crystal ball. So without further adieu, I predict that 2008 will be the year that each of us embraces the Top 5 Crystal Pineapple Predictions for the West Michigan economy:

1. Place – We will continue to see strong investment by the private sector in creating a sense of place throughout the region. This investment will be led by strong growth in research, hospitality and advanced manufacturing.
2. Capital – We are beginning the largest transfer of wealth in the history of the world, i.e. Baby Boomers retiring at the same time they inherit their parents' wealth. This will create an opportunity for capital to be invested on companies in our region. If we can create the kinds of investment opportunities that investors are seeking, we can accelerate our economy at rates that have not been seen in more than 50 years.
3. Infrastructure – The infrastructure of our economy will continue to see growth with the expansions of the Van Andel Institute, the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center, Michigan State's medical school and the new medical school at Western Michigan University. These basic infrastructure components will generate additional growth throughout the entire region.

4. Talent – Talent/people are going to be the most precious asset any region can possess. Not only does a strong, vibrant economy require the focused deployment of talent, but the wealth created by these talented people can drive a good economy to great. With the retirement of Baby Boomers and a shrinking labor force, we will witness a renewed focus on selecting (and hiring) the most talented people, who in turn, will be the most productive. Companies like Stryker, CSM, Greenleaf and 30 others in the region have made the transition to selection of employees based on talent, and I predict by the end of 2008 there will be 30 more.

5. Education – Education levels are the most important indicator of a region's ability to thrive. I believe that we will see an even stronger emphasis on education and educational capacity building. Physical facilities will expand; new, more focused programs will be put in place; and a region-wide emphasis will focus on retaining and recruiting college graduates. 2008 will undoubtedly be the year that we in West Michigan further distance ourselves from the economic doldrums that will continue on the east side of our fair state.

*Ron Kitchens is the CEO of Southwest Michigan First, the general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Venture Fund, a director of the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center and the co-author of the soon to be released book, Community Capitalism: Lessons From Kalamazoo and Beyond.*