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Detroit cannot afford to write off manufacturing

John E. Mogk

Detroit appears to be writing off manufacturing from its future economic development plans because it has no available industrial sites. Recently, it failed to compete for Chrysler's new axle plant and it does not appear to be a candidate for any of the other manufacturing facilities that the state is seeking to land.

That is a mistake.

Chrysler will close the Detroit Axle Plant with a loss of 1,646 jobs to the city and substantial tax revenues and relocate to Marysville. That is good news for the state, but not for Detroit. At the same time, the city has an aggregate of 50 square miles of vacant land, an area that exceeds the size of Livonia.

None of this vast inventory is assembled into large manufacturing sites. In Trenton, on the other hand, Chrysler will close an engine plant and rebuild a new one on available land close by, preserving Trenton's job base.

Detroit is empowered by state legislation to establish a land bank authority to better assemble and manage tax-reverted and purchased properties to create development sites, but has not acted on the legislation.

But the state, Wayne County, Genesee County and other local governments have operating land bank authorities. Genesee County Treasurer Dan Kildee reports major progress in assembling land, clearing titles and facilitating economic development in Flint. Detroit should follow suit and move to assembling large sites for manufacturing and other uses.

This is particularly important because industrial firms will seek locations for manufacturing facilities in the new technology fields into which Detroit hopes to diversify, such as energy. Mass production of alternative energy systems is indispensable to widespread consumer use and reduction of the nation's dependence on fossil fuels.

This fact was well understood 25 years ago when the U. S. Department of Energy commissioned in Detroit two studies of mass production of wind energy and solar concentrating collector systems. The studies, with input from auto engineers and top Michigan university scientists and economic analysts, found remarkable similarity between mass producing solar energy systems and the automobile. Southeast Michigan was found to have strong potential for making solar systems and devices.

Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick has said "there is no state recovery without Detroit being the focal point." If so, Detroit will have to dramatically improve on the assembly of vast areas of vacant land and its preparation for new manufacturing investments.

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