

Called window dressing

Urban revival schemes blasted

Our largest cities are 20th century dinosaurs, doomed to a shrinking importance in the society because they have declined as centers for manufacturing, finance, retailing and entertainment, a University of Michigan business economist says.

Ross Wilhelm of the U-M Graduate School of Business Administration adds that the massive attempts to revive large cities have failed because "they have been directed toward superficial factors such as the newness of buildings or paved parking lots while nothing has been done to alter the underlying economic conditions or to find substitutes for diminishing functions."

Wilhelm notes that Bureau of the Census figures for the period 1970-76 show a population decline for 18 of the 25 largest U.S. cities. Those which did not lose population were either retirement centers such as

San Diego or wholesaling distribution centers such as Memphis.

Manufacturing cities such as Detroit (down over 13 percent), Cleveland (down over 16 percent) and St. Louis (down over 16 percent) had the largest population losses. In contrast, Chicago was down just under 9 percent and New York was down 6 percent.

"The heavier losses by manufacturing cities, as contrasted with wholesaling and retirement centers, reflect the long-term shift in our economic output away from primary reliance on manufacturing and toward trades and services," Wilhelm said.

"All cities have been losing economic function to the suburbs, however, and this too has contributed to their relative declines regardless of whether they are manufacturing, wholesaling or retirement cities. Traditionally, cities have attract-

ed people and money because they also have served as retailing, entertainment and financial centers. These secondary functions have provided, over history, strong reasons why people have lived in, worked in, or visited our large cities. The role of the cities in providing or fulfilling these functions has and is diminishing, and this too is contributing to their declines."

Wilhelm points out that historically, cities have been retailing centers with stores offering wider and deeper assortments of goods than have been found in the suburbs or rural areas. Higher incomes and cars have made possible the development of regional and area shopping centers equaling or surpassing those in cities. Downtown areas, he adds, have been outmoded and have not developed offsetting attractions such as bargain prices to hold their customers.

A similar trend is evident in cities as centers for mass entertainment — sporting events, stage spectacles and big theaters.

"Large cities do continue to serve as financial centers and money warehouses," Wilhelm says. "But even this function is declining due to technological advances — computers, decentralizing securities markets, etc."

"Since the 1950s, we have pumped enormous quantities of money into our largest urban centers to save the cities. We have seen huge amounts spent to build expressways, mass transit systems, added parking as well as new office buildings, hotels and apartment complexes."

"In addition we have seen huge publicity and promotion campaigns trying to sell the idea that the cities are turning around and that they are great places to live, work and play."

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Appoint state ed board — Defebaugh

State Rep. James Defebaugh (R-Birmingham) wants to amend the Michigan Constitution to reduce the number of members of the State Board of Education and make it appointive.

Defebaugh's joint resolution, recently introduced to the lower house, would cut one member from the eight-person board and would eliminate the practice of nominating board candidates at state party conventions. Instead, state board members would be appointed by the governor.

"Most people know little or nothing about candidates running for the State Board of Education," Defebaugh said. "The political parties that nominate them don't give their candidates the support they should in conducting statewide campaigns. And the lack of knowledge on the public's part usually means that the party that wins big in November takes all eight board seats, too." Board members of the three large state universities are elected at the same time.

An appointive board, Defebaugh said, would be better balanced. The appointments, he added, would require the approval of the state Senate.

One short step toward wider OL Road

The Oakland County Road Commission's ill-fated Orchard Lake Road widening project moved one small step closer to completion last week.

Road Commission Chairman Fred Houghten decided to give the road commission the needed 27 feet of property that he owns along the route. The property is at the southwest corner of the Orchard Lake and Maple roads.

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