

POINTS OF VIEW

Once powerful state lags in new economy

One of the best things John Engler has done as governor is to have attracted Doug Rothwell to Michigan from Delaware in 1993.

Initially director of the Michigan Jobs Commission, an agency that consolidated the various job training programs into one coherent administrative unit, the slim and intense Rothwell has won praise for his intelligence, foresight and willingness to take risks by doing new things.

He moved over to run the Michigan Economic Development Corp., a public corporation set up outside the stifling state bureaucratic structure to oversee the state's job and business attraction and retention programs. (He got a hefty raise by moving outside civil service pay restrictions, but that's OK. You get what you pay for, and Rothwell's the real deal.)

The MEDC has just issued a report on Michigan's economy, "Strategic Directions for Michigan's Future." It makes fascinating reading. In the decades following the Great Depres-

sion, Michigan's auto-led economy flourished, leading the nation in automation, production and technological progress. Our economy stalled in the '70s and '80s, when the auto industry was being pummeled by foreign competition and unemployment skyrocketed. But good times in the '90s led to a surging auto industry and a rapidly growing service sector.

The MEDC report points out that Michigan began to "benchmark" against other industrial states such as Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin in the early '90s. In many ways, Michigan has improved its ranking against these competitors in recent years.

Current success in automobiles, however, has led to new goals. The MEDC report suggests Michigan should now concentrate on growth over the next decade in areas where the state has a comparative advantage against other states: advanced manufacturing, information technologies and life sciences.

And the report proposes a new set of "benchmark" states, including Cali-



PHILIP POWER

fornia, Washington, Virginia and Massachusetts. When ranked against our new competitors, Michigan doesn't look so good.

For example, while Michigan's work force productivity ranks third when compared with our old competitors, it comes in dead last against the new set. While Michigan is technologically advanced compared to its old competitors, our state is last among our new competitors in percentage of households with Internet access.

Worse is our standing in venture

capital, arguably the main growth engine for new, high tech companies. Among new competitors, Michigan ranks dead last in the dollars available for venture capital financing. The dollar gap is considerable: Michigan, with \$2.4 million available for venture financing in the first quarter of 1999, is far, far behind Virginia, with nearly \$60 million available to entrepreneurs.

Moreover, Michigan has a poor image among business leaders. A focus group quoted in the MEDC report concludes that "a number of people didn't think of anything specific when asked for their thoughts on Michigan - nothing comes to mind or they simply said - Detroit - and nothing else." Many business leaders think Michigan is simply dominated by the auto industry, with little room for any other kind of business.

Such perceptions, even though faulty, lead to decisions that hurt Michigan. A group of business leaders in New York, when asked which states they would consider for expan-

sion or relocation, ranked North Carolina, South Carolina and California at the top, with Texas and Ohio in the middle. Michigan ranked last!

So part of what MEDC wants to do is as simple as educating business leaders around the country about Michigan's real strengths. There is a real story to be told here. Michigan kids scored an average of 1,100 in the SAT exam in 1997, above any of our new competitors. And Michigan's colleges and universities are as good as they get; the University of Michigan, for example, is No. 1 in the country in sponsored research.

(This is the first of a series of columns examining the MEDC report on Michigan's economic future.)

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net

Tasty revenge: She who gobbles last ... gobbles best

Hopefully, my revenge will be sweet...and succulent.

I'm talking about one nasty, fowl-mouthed, bead-eyed, overweight old hen who persistently pursued me at Roper's Turkey Farm in Livonia the other day.

OK, so I entered the turkey quarters uninvited (by the turkeys), but reporters go to a lot of places uninvited. I didn't mean to ruffle any feathers. I had a job to do. My editor wanted a Thanksgiving story.

I'm convinced that savage bird pegged me for a good pecking as soon as I closed the gate behind me. She emerged from a sea of white feathers and headed my way, head bobbing and knee-level gaze never wavering.

She's just assertive, I thought at first. How cute.

"Oh, look at that funny, little black spot on her back," I said to our photographer, who was surrounded by a group of turkey groupies. Black Spot stood transfixed in front of me.

"Isn't she cute...ooohhh, birdie, birdie...don't get so close...nice turkey, go away...no, don't...no!"

Peck, peck, peck. "It's your buttons," said Christine Roper, foster mother to Black Dot and her 4,500 siblings.



RENEE SKOGLUND

I looked down my dress. Twelve shiny brown buttons, from neck to mid-calf. Holy white meat. I took several steps backwards. Black Dot followed.

Peck, peck, peck. I wasn't going to give up my buttons without a fight. THWACK! I broadsided the bird with my notebook, knocking her a couple of feet across the yard. She regained her drumsticks in no time.

Peck, peck, peck. THWACK! THWACK! THWACK! This time, Black Dot budged less than a foot. I was going to lose the great

Button Battle. I ran to the other side of the yard, parting those Broad-Breasted White Wilfords like Moses parting the Red Sea.

Ah, safe. Peck, peck, peck. I know. By now you're expecting me to roll out the credits to Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds." (Was that Tippi Hedren or Tipper Gore?) But this scenario was "The Birds" on steroids. This was "The Turkeys." By the time Christine came to my rescue, I had decided my editor would have a bird-less Thanksgiving edition. No story was worth being stripped of my buttons.

However, once safely outside the turkey yard, I changed my mind. "I'd like to see your slaughter house," I told Christine.

"You would?"
"Yup."
"Why?"

She needed to ask? I looked over my shoulder and gave Black Dot and all the other \$2.39-a-pound gobblers the cranberries.

"Christine, I'd like to order one of your birds this year," I said, following her into the turkeys' death chamber.

"Do you take special requests?"
Heh, heh, heh... revenge indeed is sweet. Remember, Thanksgiving is at my house this year. Four o'clock. Black Dot and all the trimmings.

Renee Skoglund is an Observer staff writer. See her story on the turkey farm on page A9.

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