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Townsend: Growing Michigan's population should be a bipartisan process

Jim Townsend The Detroit News

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During my first run for the state Legislature back in 2010, I put out a campaign flyer calling for investments in regional public transit, public education and vibrant communities that can attract and retain talent and jobs.

Our two boys were in elementary and middle school then. Now they're college graduates, and most of the time, seeing them means traveling to other parts of the country that continue to draw many Michigan residents seeking economic opportunities and public amenities that we're still struggling to provide here.

In fact, the Great Lakes State ranks 49 out of the 50 states in population growth.

And while Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's Growing Michigan Together Council's (GMTC) report offers a valuable collection of data and proposals for addressing the population problem, a lot of their ideas sound familiar -- as does the partisan sniping that accompanied its release.

Republicans who dismiss the report's recommendations must answer for failing to come up with solutions of their own that enable our state to compete for population, since they had full control of state government from 2011 to 2018.

At the same time, Democrats' call to move immediately to drafting legislation based on this report seems precipitous given that Democratic-dominated states like New York and California, have been losing population in recent years, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The truth is that neither party has cracked the code on what it takes to develop and compete for educated workers that attract the jobs and capital investment our state needs for a rising standard of living. As the growth council noted, the legislative and executive branches now

must get to work separating fact from fiction and building public consensus and support for solutions that can stand the test of time.

To take a deep dive into these issues, House and Senate leaders need to look to their own standing committees, which are likely to be relatively idle given that the House Democrats' majority disappeared last month when two of their members were elected to mayorships.

Michigan lawmakers could borrow an approach used by their counterparts in Colorado (which has ranked seventh in population growth since 2000), where legislators acting through "interim committees" regularly conduct in-depth reviews of important issues between their legislative sessions and publish their findings to help build consensus on the facts and potential solutions. In recent years such reports have enabled Colorado to approach issues ranging from jail standards to opioid addiction to health care access on a bipartisan basis.

Michigan lawmakers and staff can begin with the council report but must go further by probing issues that need more exploration and inviting younger, more diverse voices to provide input. Most importantly, legislators leading such a probe must decide from the beginning that their goal is to conduct a bipartisan process that gives members of both parties a legitimate opportunity to contribute to the investigation with the aim of producing a report of their findings that all members can sign.

Despite the rancor and division that dominates coverage of Congress and our state capitals, there are Democratic and Republican lawmakers across the country who are setting a higher standard for fact-finding and oversight that Michigan legislators would do well to emulate.

Ignoring Michigan's population struggles and playing politics or rushing through a bill package without a consensus on the facts, risks once again missing the opportunity to address a problem that will continue to limit opportunities for Michiganders and deny our kids a state they can proudly and wisely call home.

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