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Steve Tobocman: Immigration is key to building a 'Global Detroit'

STEVE TOBOCMAN | TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 08, 2011



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My grandfather, Morris Tobocman, emigrated from eastern Poland to Southwest Detroit (next to the fire station at Dix and Central) to pursue the American Dream. He probably found early 20th Century Detroit a suitable home for an entrepreneurial laborer looking for a home where he could chose whether or not to practice his Judaism, how to express his political views, and, perhaps most importantly, a place where he could earn a decent living.

Known for its budding industriousness, innovation, and growth, Detroit probably met his dreams as he rose to relative affluence, as he died in the midst of constructing his own apartment building at Seven Mile and Greenfield in 1957. He would have been proud that both of his sons graduated from the University of Michigan and have had successful careers as architects, designing and building modernist homes in Detroit's suburbs. It must have exceeded his wildest dreams, however, that his grandson would serve three terms representing Southwest Detroit in the Michigan House of Representatives, including a term as the Majority Floor Leader (the second-ranking position in the State House).

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Morris Tobocman's story is a typical American story of immigration, and it helps define a central piece of what makes America so economically and politically successful -- and what made Detroit so dynamic in the early 20th Century. One hundred years ago, Detroit (33 percent foreign born at the time) was driven by an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit that powered the "[Arsenal of Democracy](#)," and drove America to become the world's unrivaled industrial leader.

The incredibly important role that Detroit played last century has been compared to the role that Silicon Valley (47 percent foreign born) plays in modern times. Our current economic transition into the new, globally competitive knowledge economy is similar to the transition we made in the early 20th Century; and our current economic woes reflect the painful transformation from an auto manufacturing center to something more viable.

No one strategy will, by itself, revitalize the Detroit regional economy. However, nothing is more powerful for remaking Detroit as a center of innovation, entrepreneurship and population growth, than embracing and increasing immigrant populations and the entrepreneurial culture and global connections that they bring and deliver.

For the past year, I have been commissioned by the [New Economy Initiative](#), [Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce](#), and [Skillman Foundation](#) to study the impacts that immigration and global connectedness have on metro Detroit. The results were just released as a report titled Global Detroit report and they are staggering. In sharp contrast to the negative stereotypes often held, immigrants have contributed to metro Detroit's economy well beyond their share of the population and are uniquely poised to help our

region succeed in the new economy.

Michigan immigrants are well-educated and a positive addition to our talent attraction efforts.

A full 37 percent of Michigan's foreign born possess a four-year college degree as compared to 23.7 percent of U.S.-born Michigan residents.

American and Michigan immigrants have the educations and skills in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields critical to our region's success in the New Economy.

Half of all new doctorates in engineering; 45 percent of all new doctorates in life sciences, physical sciences, and computer sciences; and 40 percent of all new masters' degrees in computer sciences, physical sciences, and engineering are awarded nationally to foreign-born students. These results matriculate into the American workplace where 47 percent of all scientists and engineers with Ph.D.s and 24 percent of all scientists and engineers with bachelor degrees are foreign born. Immigrants make up 25 percent of all practicing physicians in the U.S.

American and Michigan immigrants start the high-tech and venture-

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capital businesses that lead our entry into the New Economy.

Immigrants started 25 percent of all public companies that were originally venture-backed (some of the most important firms in the new economy) from 1990-2005. Immigrants started 25.3 percent of all the high-tech firms started in the U.S. from 1995-2005, and 32.8 percent of all such firms in Michigan. Michigan ranked third in the nation and Michigan's foreign born were six times more likely than non-immigrants to found a high-tech firm.

American and Michigan immigrants invent the new technologies that will continue to drive future job creation and regional prosperity.

In 2006, 25.6 percent of all the international patent applications at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) originating from the U.S. listed a resident alien as one of its key inventors. Adjusting to include naturalized citizens, it is estimated that 35 percent of the international patent applications from Michigan in 2006 had an immigrant as one of its key inventors, ranking the state 8th in nation in this statistic and suggesting that Michigan's foreign born were six times more likely than non-immigrants to file an international patent.

Michigan immigrants are more entrepreneurial and more likely to start businesses.

Nationally, immigrants were 1.89 times more likely to start a business in 2008 than non-immigrants. With 2,276 new immigrant business owners from 1996-2007, representing 15.8 percent of all new businesses started during that period, Michigan ranked seventh in the nation for the gross number of new immigrant business owners, suggesting that in Michigan, immigrants were nearly three times as likely as native born residents to start a business between 1996 and 2007.

Michigan immigrants are productive, hard-working, and more likely to be working.

In Michigan, 64.4 percent of the foreign born are working-age compared to 50.8 percent of the non-immigrant population, a critical fact in a rapidly aging state that also is rapidly losing working-age residents due to out-migration. An example of immigrant industriousness can be found in the Hispanic population in southeastern Michigan, who make up just 3.5 percent of the region's population, but comprise 6.5 percent of its total employment.

Immigrants are unique catalysts for economic renewal and population growth in cities like Detroit and the region's other core communities.

A distinct benefit immigrants groups provide is the energy they bring to revitalizing urban neighborhoods. Ethnic enclaves have provided new blood to blighted and decaying neighborhoods as immigrant families move into vacant housing, invest in their rehabilitation, start new retail businesses, revive commercial retail corridors, and breathe life into these abandoned and/or decaying communities.

Largely because of automotive heritage, metro Detroit has tremendous assets upon which to build a Global Detroit. Detroit has the second largest immigrant population of any Great Lake regional metropolitan area with 365,000 foreign born (8.4 percent of the regional population) with some of the world's largest populations of Middle Eastern, Albanian, and Macedonian, outside of their home regions. We possess a significant number of global firms (more than the Celtic Tiger of Ireland), a bi-national business culture, and 23,600 international university and graduate students (the 8th largest population of any state) who inject nearly \$600 million annually into the state's economy and represent a strong foundation of talent upon which to build.

To capitalize on these strengths and help spark regional economic growth and prosperity, the [Global Detroit](#) study recommends eleven strategic actions. The

report more fully explains each initiative. The study's 38-member advisory board, funders, and strategic partners are in the midst of funding, organizing, and launching a comprehensive Global Detroit effort that includes as many of these strategic actions as possible.

Metro Detroit is in crisis. If we don't take action to speed our own entry into the new economy, we will never return Detroit to a region of prosperity. Nothing can make a more powerful contribution to Detroit's rebirth than an affirmative immigrant-welcoming and global-connection building effort.

Steve Tobocman lives in Southwest Detroit, which he served in the state House of Representatives. Send feedback [here](#). The NEI Global Detroit study is available online [here](#).

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Contact Marvin [here](#)

Photos:

Steve Tobocman

Children from Vista Nuevas Headstart hold hands in dance during the Celebration of Cultures festival held in Clark Park

Weighing tortillas at La Jalasciense Tortilla Factory in Southwest Detroit

A third generation business, La Jalasciense Tortilla Factory in Southwest Detroit

Celebration of Cultures festival held at Clark Park

Mother and daughter dancing at the Celebration of Cultures festival held in Clark Park

Strolling through Clark Park during the Celebration of Cultures festival

Immigration Rally

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Regina Baker · Senior Research Analyst at Kidney Epidemiology and Cost Center

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