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Steve Tobocman

*By Matthew Lewis
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Steve Tobocman is a startup guy, but he's far from the startup stereotype you'd find in Silicon Valley or New York City. "I've had an opportunity to be very entrepreneurial in the nonprofit, urban economic development space," he says while sitting in a common area of the [Green Garage](#) in Midtown, where his consulting firm New Solutions Group has its office.

Tobocman has helped found a handful of nonprofit public policy startups in Detroit and Lansing that have become self-sustaining—organizations like [Michigan Community Resources](#) (née Community Legal Resources), [Community Development Advocates of Detroit](#), the [Community Economic](#)

[Development Association of Michigan](#), the [Michigan Foreclosure Task Force](#), and the [Michigan Political Leadership Program](#).

Oh, and he also served as State Representative of the 12th District (Southwest Detroit) in the Michigan House between 2002 and 2008, acting as Majority Floor Leader for the Democratic Party during his second term. (To learn more about the challenges of being effective in the State House, listen to [this 2003 episode](#) of WBEZ Chicago's *This American Life* radio program in which Tobocman is featured.)

With such an accomplished resume, you might be surprised to find out that Tobocman is only 44 years old and his career is just getting going.

In 2009, he launched his latest venture, [New Solutions Group LLC](#), a for-profit public policy consulting business. Not your typical consultancy, NSG fits nicely into the community of triple-bottom line businesses that call the Green Garage home (read [UIX's profile of Green Garage co-founder Peggy Brennan here](#)). NSG is dedicated to ensuring a high quality of life for members of the firm, gives 10 percent of its profits each year to

charity, and focuses on interesting and creative projects that contribute to the common good.

One such project has occupied the lion's share of Tobocman's time since 2009—Global Detroit, "a regional economic development strategy that looks at immigrants and internationals as a means of revitalizing metro Detroit's economy." Tobocman spent the first year of Global Detroit's existence researching and writing a report that identified eleven strategic initiatives to help revitalize the region's economy through support of its immigrant communities.

To date, many of those initiatives have come to life and attracted millions in philanthropic funding—initiatives like the [Global Talent Retention Initiative](#), which helps connect international students at Michigan's universities connect with jobs that will allow them to stay in state, and [ProsperUS](#), an organization that provides assistance to immigrant entrepreneurs in three Detroit neighborhoods.

Tobocman believes that immigrants seeking prosperity for themselves can also create prosperity in the communities in which they settle. His experience serving Southwest Detroit (one of Michigan's most prominent immigrant gateway communities), both as a State Representative and through his nonprofit work, has made the benefits of immigration abundantly clear to him.

"Immigration," says Tobocman, "is the most important neighborhood revitalization strategy. It's hard to knock what immigration has done for challenged communities like Southwest Detroit, Hamtramck, and Dearborn."

Yet despite the existence of vibrant immigrant communities in our region and our heritage as an industrial magnet for immigrant workers in the 20th century, Tobocman contends that we have failed in recent decades to attract and retain foreign entrepreneurs and investors who can spur economic growth.

But now, thanks in large part to Global Detroit, Southeast Michigan is joining other metro areas in the Midwest in what Tobocman calls a "growing and cutting edge movement." These places are now making concerted efforts to create environments where immigrants are embraced as critical contributors to their cultural and economic vitality.

"We are not marketing Detroit to immigrants, *per se*," says Tobocman. "Our overall thesis is focusing on those who are here already and making sure they have a great experience." If they have a great experience, the thinking goes, they will put down roots and more will follow them here.

"In 50 years, a lot can happen," says Tobocman as he reflects on the transformation of cities like Toronto and Vancouver into cosmopolitan, economically vibrant places thanks in large part to immigration. "I think some of these things can pay huge dividends and we will find out how the city of Detroit can become a dynamic, diverse place. The main question is how do we who are already here integrate ourselves into a world with diversity."

All photos by Doug Coombe.