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Data pro calls for better decisions

*BY CAROL CAIN
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST*

MACKINAC ISLAND -- Give Kurt Metzger a problem and the demographer will dive in headfirst.

He's spent years examining the racial divide in metro Detroit.

And he's spent time analyzing the brain drain of young talent.

He helped with the new One D Scorecard, developed in conjunction with the New Economy Initiative, which was released last week during the Detroit Regional Chamber's Mackinac Leadership Conference to compare Michigan with other states from a livability standpoint.

What stumps Metzger is what he sees as the media's preoccupation with dysfunctional and tussling politicians rather than people working to move the city and region forward in a cooperative way.

The squabbling and the coverage are mentioned by people he talks to in analyzing topics.

"It impacts our image and what people think about Detroit and the region," Metzger said.

"We go for politicians who are divisive. When it comes to things like regional cooperation, they are oftentimes more into grandstanding than getting things done. And the media loves it and dwells on it."

He added: "I wish the Monicas and Brookses and Ficanos would simply take care of things and stop trying to incite headlines on the battle along the way."

Sometimes, it's like going to a hockey game.

We know the action on the ice and scoring of goals is thrilling, but there's nothing like an old-fashioned brawl to bring people to their feet.

And it's those heated moments that often make the highlight reel on sports shows.

Metzger, former director of research for Wayne State University and United Way for Southeastern Michigan, has been serving as director of the Detroit-Area Community Indicators System since November.

He's an advocate of using data-driven decisions to move communities forward.

He says the mission of D-ACIS is to provide better information to help make better decisions.

His center will help make information available to charitable foundations about neighborhoods in metro Detroit.

The center, funded by the Skillman and Kresge foundations, says it hopes the data will help nonprofits apply for grants.

Keeping young talent

Lou Glazer, who opened last year's Mackinac Conference with a conversation about the brain drain of young talent, thinks the chamber's year-old statewide internship program is "a big step forward."

"It's designed to say to kids, 'Yes, there are jobs here' and gives them a reason to want to stay," said Glazer, who is the force behind Michigan Future, a think tank.

Hundreds of young people have come to the Web site created by the chamber -- www.interninmichigan.com

Sandy Pierce, CEO of Charter One and chairwoman of the Mackinac Conference, said the new portal is a clearinghouse for Michigan employers to post internships and for students to apply.

Dick Blouse, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber, said the chamber plans to hold periodic meetings for employers about the effort so more consider adding internships.

"This is vital to long-term prospects for Michigan," Blouse said.

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