



Tom Walsh: Detroit area has tech jobs base to build on

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MACKINAC ISLAND -- Southeast Michigan has the highest concentration of technology-related employment in the Midwest, and trails only San Jose, Calif.'s Silicon Valley region nationally in architecture and engineering employment, according to a new study to be released on Mackinac Island today.

The study, conducted by Anderson Economic Group of East Lansing for the Automation Alley business accelerator, compares the seven-county Detroit region with 14 other U.S. metros, including Boston, San Jose, Seattle, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Dallas and Austin, Texas. Midwest metros included Chicago, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Grand Rapids.

"This is not about making a comeback; it's not a rebirth or a renaissance," says Ken Rogers, executive director of Automation Alley. "Southeast Michigan is a leading technology center, and this study proves it."

The study will be rolled out at a media briefing later today at the Detroit Regional Chamber's annual Mackinac Policy Conference.

"We're not a wannabe," Rogers adds, "we're a player."

His point is well taken, amid all the hand-wringing and moaning about Michigan's economic struggles during the past decade.

Before *and* after the economic crisis of 2008-09, the auto bailouts and bankruptcies, the 14% jobless numbers -- before *and* after all of that -- the Detroit region has had strong economic assets. Lots of engineers, great research universities, clusters of high-technology employment in the automotive, defense and other industries.

We need to start selling those assets and stop apologizing for the past litany of management, labor and policy failings. That's the message here.

Patrick Anderson, founder of the consulting group that did the study, put it this way in a foreword to the report:

"Despite negative media coverage that has pinned metropolitan Detroit as a declining region, the results of our research indicate

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that southeast Michigan is positioned ahead of Boston, Seattle and Austin in almost every measure analyzed," Anderson wrote.

Among Midwest metro areas, the study shows, Detroit has the highest concentration of technology jobs, with 13.7% of all jobs, compared with a national average of 9.3%. Grand Rapids was second and Minneapolis was third among Midwest cities on this measure.

Southeast Michigan, predictably, dwarfs the other regions in advanced automotive technology companies and employment, but also had solid numbers in life science and other sectors.

"We've got a strong base to build on," Rogers said. "We need to continue to be collaborative, to get business and government and academia working together."

And stop all the whining and pity party talk. My words, not his.

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