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Local Congress brings new generation of leaders

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The old heads of southeast Michigan have done a pretty good job of messing up regional cooperation – a key reason this region is, economically, so far behind other metro areas. Nor have these same politicians and leaders been successful in keeping talented young people here. The region and state continue to lose that battle in the new knowledge-based economy. In Seattle, for example, 53% of residents have four-year degrees. In Chicago, the share is 29%, compared with 11% in Detroit. Any time I speak to high school classes, I ask how many plan to live somewhere else after they finish their education, and most hands shoot up.

So the efforts of a new Millennial Mayors Congress, representing 18 Detroit-area communities, are something to encourage and watch. The Congress pairs an elected official such as a mayor with a community resident, age 18-35. The delegations exchange ideas and develop local and regional policy recommendations. The group is assisted by researchers, technical experts and administrative support coordinated by the Michigan Suburbs Alliance, a coalition of older-inner-ring suburbs.

Over the next six months, Congress representatives will develop a set of goals on regional issues, which they aim to adopt by 2010. They will then work to make those goals a reality.

Young people in this region don't have a lot of the baggage and biases that their parents and grandparents carry, especially about the importance of Detroit, the region's core and signature city, to the future of southeast Michigan. Keeping them here is a good way to build the region's economic future. Getting politicians to work directly with young people is a good start.

Communities in the Millennial Mayors Congress include Eastpointe, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Ferndale, Grosse Pointe Woods, Hamtramck, Hazel Park, Highland Park, Huntington Woods, Lathrup Village, Lincoln Park, Madison Heights, Melvindale, Mount Clemens, Pleasant Ridge, Roseville, Royal Oak Township, Southfield, Southgate, Sterling Heights, Wayne and Westland. For more information, www.millennialmayors.org.