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### 2009 Mackinac Policy Conference

## Millennial congress' goal: Help area move beyond an automotive economy

By Sherri Begin Welch

When the **Millennial Mayors Congress** emerges from its first meeting Saturday, its 22 community members from Southeast Michigan will have identified a single issue or opportunity to focus on its first year.

That area could be economic diversification or transit, said Sharon Carney, 24, special project director overseeing the congress for the **Michigan Suburbs Alliance** and a millennial herself.

At a series of community conversations in February with city officials and young residents of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, there was general recognition of the need to move beyond the automotive economy and get a more reliable, regional transit system, she said.

"The concept is to pick one area for the first year, and each member community will decide internally how to work on that issue," Carney said.

Any specific measures or goals would come later.

"We're hoping that the next time the congress convenes in about six months, then they can set specific goals," she said.

The first half of the meeting is open to the public. In the afternoon, the congress will go into closed session to vote on an area of focus from among those discussed during the open session. It also will elect a nine- to 12-member steering committee that will meet bimonthly to spearhead research and investigate strategies in its focus area.

The Michigan Suburbs Alliance plans to verse congress members and attendees of the meetings in such documents as **Detroit Renaissance Inc.**'s "Road to Renaissance" study on the region's strongest assets and areas of economic opportunity, and the **Michigan Municipal League's** Prosperity Agenda, which advocates policy changes to create the things that attract young people, such as: public transit systems; mixed-use developments where people can live, work and shop; entertainment and cultural attractions; green spaces and economic development initiatives that add jobs through support for entrepreneurs.

"The idea is for the congress not to operate in a vacuum, but to be aware of opportunities to coordinate their activities around certain issues with other organizations, to learn from the research on these issues so it can take action based on cutting-edge research," Carney said.

Eric Robertson, who is chief administrative officer for the **Center City Commission** in Memphis, will give a keynote speech during the public portion of the meeting to highlight the need for communities to create a culture of opportunity.

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Robertson "is recognized by many organizations in (Tennessee) as a rising leader," Carney said, "and has interesting things to say about ... how places can become more attractive to young people by creating opportunities."

According to Robertson, opportunities can be in lifestyle, opportunities to excel professionally or to have an impact on community, Carney said.

The morning agenda also will include a discussion on sustainability and how the region can get "greener."

"Part of that will be identifying ways we could save cities money through sustainable (initiatives)," Carney said. "There's (also) a significant amount of federal funding for those activities."

The congress "is one of the first steps in giving young professional, emerging generations a voice in where they live," said Christianne Sims, director of the **Detroit Regional Chamber's** young professionals group, **Fusion**, which serves as the primary advocate for young professionals in the region. It also assisted the suburbs alliance in finding candidates to serve as delegates on the new congress.

The regional component of the congress is key, she said.

"Getting the next generation involved in building those bridges will hopefully be the first step in making regional collaboration a reality."

The congress is kicking off its meeting with a free reception at the **Hard Rock Café** in Detroit on Friday, 4:30-7 p.m. For more information, go online to [www.michigansuburbsalliance.org](http://www.michigansuburbsalliance.org).

Fusion is hosting the congress' meeting Saturday at the chamber's offices at One Woodward in Detroit.

The cost for the first half of the meeting, which includes continental breakfast and lunch, is \$25 for those age 35 and under and \$50 for everyone else.

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