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Guest Column: No rush on Math Science Center

Students, community are owed a thorough and diligent process

Jim Hettinger

Your editorial of June 3, 2009, calling for a decision soon on the possible relocation of the Math Science Center hit many salient points that are being taken into consideration as the feasibility process continues to unfold. It should be noted that the threat of space deficiencies at the Center existed long before Battle Creek Unlimited floated the idea of a possible relocation.

While we agree in spirit that this process should move expeditiously, we do not believe diligence in searching out the answers should be compromised.

At the request of the Battle Creek Board of Education, we are studying the capital, operational, and sustainability costs of four different possible locations including the present site in the City of Springfield.

The City of Springfield under the leadership of Mayor Sue Anderson and City Manager Franklin Peterson has been a great economic development partner with the City of Battle Creek in a number of ways. The Magnificent Motor Mile is recognized throughout the Midwest as a new collaborative approach undertaken by the two cities to preserve and enhance the Dickman Road corridor. In addition to retaining the dealerships on the corridor, rather than seeing an evacuation to I-94 sites, the collaboration has actually attracted more investment. Moreover, we hope the strength built on the corridor provides some staying power during the radical contraction of the auto industry in Michigan.

I say all this to make a point that Springfield should not and will not be forgotten in any discussion of relocation of the Math Science Center. The Battle Creek Board of Education has been adamant that there should not be a solution in one place at the expense of creating a problem in another.

The Math Science Center is a huge Battle Creek success story. Even those people who believe it their responsibility to constantly find fault with things would have to admit the Center is a marquee attraction to this area. Outstanding work is being done at the Center by some of the area's very brightest and most talented students. We owe it to the students and to the community to be as thorough and diligent as possible.

Times are very tough and despite some hopeful economic indicators, Battle Creek has yet to feel the full brunt of the economic tsunami sweeping across our state. We must recognize that resources are increasingly exiguous and that decisions must be based on as much data as we can muster.

The proposed Downtown Transformation Plan is based on an underlying theme of mass. Mass would be created by food security research, training of food inspectors, an enlarged Kellogg presence, an enlarged presence of some Michigan research universities, interested companies such as contract research organizations, and the Math Science Center. The presence of the Math Science Center may not be necessary for the mass, but it would be nice.

Somewhere in our analysis, we must think about opportunity costs. Those are opportunities that may be lost to our young people if we fail to provide pathways to career development here in their hometown. We are attempting to do the same thing with Aviation and Aerospace as well as Information Technology.

We are hopeful that we can take sufficient data and a recommendation to the Battle Creek Board of Education in late August or early September. During the summer, we are planning to make numerous presentations to groups all over the city. A comprehensive study of this nature needs the constructive input of residents who are concerned with the quality of education in Battle Creek.

Whatever the decision, we need to work harder for quality education in Battle Creek. The Upjohn Institute has noted that of all cities in Michigan with populations of 50,000 and more, Battle Creek ranks last in educational attainment. I heard an interesting statistic the other day. Unemployment among people in Michigan with a four year degree is approximately 3.5%.

We are blessed to have the very best Math Science Center in Michigan. That being the case, we should play to our strengths and the strengths of our young people.

Jim Hettinger is senior adviser to Battle Creek Unlimited, which he led for 30 years before retiring in 2008.
