

Our economy: How to keep college grads in Rochester

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Grads won't flee if Rochester is a science-technology job hub

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GUEST ESSAYIST

As a young professional myself, I'm concerned about how to keep young people from leaving Rochester. As a candidate for Monroe County Legislature, I'm convinced that we have no choice but to reverse this trend.

My journey started off like those of so many other young adults from Monroe County. I left home for college, graduated and found work out of state. After spending time away from metropolitan Rochester, my wife, Emily, and I felt a strong pull to come back home. We missed our family and friends. We missed the quality of life, affordable housing and friendly neighbors. The small-town atmosphere and easy accessibility to big-city culture here are difficult to match.

Unfortunately, our return to put down roots back in Monroe County is not the norm.

A recent special report titled "Hanging on to talent" (April 10) in the Democrat and Chronicle examined this issue in depth. Monroe County's population of 20- to 34-year-olds dropped by 21.4 percent in the 1990s, according to the 2000 census. The Monroe County Board of Elections has further evidence of this trend. In 2000-04, overall voter enrollment was up 15,000. However, strikingly, enrollment of people between 25 and 44 was down by more than 13,000.

The brain drain threatens the cycle whereby economic opportunities converge with a skilled work force to create prosperity. Without one, we cannot build upon the other. In order to succeed, we must retain our young professionals. We need to attract new families who are going to become active in our communities and grow our knowledge-based economy.

I believe we can reclaim our prominent heritage as a world leader in innovation and culture. The pieces of the puzzle are here: we're fifth in the country in overall innovation capacity, first in patent registrations, and we've been rated the seventh-best place to raise a family.

Cutting-edge research in biotechnology, infotonics, optics, and fuel cell technology has created a synergistic opportunity to leverage our educational resources and drive economic growth. With our local talent, research and development capabilities and technological infrastructure, we can see the possibilities of a "hydrogen economy." We must collaborate with industry and academia to support this growth.

Government must implement policies that support the digital revolution. Right now we're being left behind. Countries in the Pacific Rim are way ahead of us in terms of broadband hot spots. That is why I support Monroe County using its current fiber optic network to create a countywide wireless network. This is an economic imperative. The federal Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates that for each \$1 invested in broadband, nearly \$3 is added to the economy. Such a network would establish a 21st-century infrastructure that aligns with the progressive and innovative vision of our area as a regional high-tech center.

Policymakers should seek wherever possible to facilitate enhancement of work force skills, promote entrepreneurialism, and create tax incentives that support the creation of high-paying jobs.

We can move our local economy forward by relying on research-based industries, technology, flexibility and creativity. Furthermore, we can create more jobs that not only create more prosperity but help residents live better lives.

Propelled by promise and progress, Monroe County can be a place that attracts and keeps our young professionals.

Heider, of Brighton, is the Democratic candidate for the 14th District seat in the Monroe County Legislature.

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