

SIGNS OF TURNAROUND FOR INDIANA'S ECONOMY

In reinventing economy, don't pass them by

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As I read on the March 28 Focus cover Sidney Taurel's pointed call to attract and support businesses in which the critical resource is the human mind, I couldn't help but think of Robert Johnson's classic 1936 blues recording "Crossroads Blues": "Standin' at the crossroads, tried to flag a ride. Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by."

Johnson's Depression-era song, which expressed the frustration of a generation of disenfranchised and poorly educated workers, rings true for many inner-city workers today. They are among the most squandered resources in the industrialized world. We may have a brain drain problem in Indiana, but we have a wasted resource problem, too.

It is correct for the state to chart a course toward a new economy based on life sciences, information technology and advanced manufacturing. But what can we do now to create jobs, especially for our most depressed communities, as these new industries develop?

Traditional manufacturing still makes up more than 20 percent of Indiana's economic output. Could we get an immediate bang if we begin the processes being advanced by BioCrossroads and simultaneously reinvent the manufacturing base of our inner cities, especially focusing on small business, which is the engine of job creation?

In today's economy, tool and die makers, metal fabricators and a host of small production shops must use technology to make themselves more competitive. Many of these companies still exist in the urban core. The challenge is to help them grow while fostering new opportunities for minority entrepreneurs.

Taurel rightly calls for better efforts to leverage the wealth and diversity of resources we already have. He points out that supplier diversity will help foster innovation, but we need a strategy to make that

happen. We can better define the methods to leverage these available resources. In charting our state's new course, we should also look at resources right in front of us.

A good place to start is the Indianapolis Enterprise Zone, which currently has more than 200 businesses employing some 4,000 workers. The zone and surrounding area contain high unemployment rates, trending above 10 percent. The zone also contains a tremendous opportunity, The Keystone Park. This development, designed to create more than 1,000 new jobs, is moving slowly. Yes, the economic slowdown is one reason, but are we doing all we can to sell the opportunities?

We can build on the existing sectors in the inner city in some of the same ways we are building on the assets we have in life sciences in Indiana. We need sector initiatives that can attract new businesses to our inner city. To assist the process we can better utilize the resources of educational institutions such as Martin University, Vincennes University and Ivy Tech. We can better appreciate the work of groups such as the Indianapolis Urban Enterprise Association, the Martindale-Brightwood Community Development Corp and the Zone Business Association. These organizations have an important role to play in job creation.

The Rev. Boniface Hardin, president of Martin University, recently gave a talk to the Zone Business Association that called for those with the dreams to come together to make inner-city job creation a reality and to invigorate the process. I hope we hear his urgent call.

While we work to reinvent ourselves, we should not forget where we are coming from or the job needs of the most disadvantaged among us. This dual strategy will serve us well.