

Michigan must be bold to stop national jokes

BY SUE BURZYNSKI BULLARD

If absence makes the heart grow fonder, it also makes it grow more observant. A



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Michiganian most of my life, I am proud to be from the Great Lakes state.

Now living in Nebraska, I Google Michigan news to keep up. The state's downside is covered in

grim depth. It's news, sure. But the sour image is not tempered with much good news. Even more travel stories would suggest more to Michigan than unemployment.

A sample of what outsiders see and say:

Michigan again led the nation with a double-digit unemployment rate, climbing to 11.6 percent. By comparison, Nebraska's unemployment hit 4.3 percent, well under the national average.

An Associated Press story made the front page in newspapers across the country. The headline in the Portland, Oregonian blared: "In Detroit, a house costs less than a car."

And the New York Times ran a story on foreclosures in Detroit, headlined: "For Sale, the \$100 house."

That prompted a Nebraska colleague to joke that he was planning to buy a house in Michigan with the spare change in his desk drawer.

But there's more. A Twitter link directs readers to a Time magazine photo spread, labeled "Detroit's Beautiful, Horrible Decline" The pictures, by two French photojournalists, document abandoned buildings, including a former school heaped with trash.

A student columnist at the Daily Nebraskan writes about the dangers of students "sexting" or sending text messages with risqué photos and words. As her ultimate what not to do example, she cites former Detroit Mayor



Steve Perez / The Detroit News

Detroit City Council member Barbara-Rose Collins earlier this month leads a rendition of "Onward Christian Soldiers" in opposition to a Cobo Center regional authority supported by Mayor Kenneth Cockrel. The video clip received extensive national exposure.

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Kwame Kilpatrick's text message escapades that ultimately led him to a jail cell.

Then there's the latest YouTube hit: City Councilwoman Barbara-Rose Collins leading a chorus in "Onward Christian Soldiers" and railing against European rulers, as if she hadn't heard the British surrendered Detroit a couple of centuries ago.

This follows the national attention of the man frozen in ice and ignored in a Detroit warehouse. Only in Detroit.

Watching Rosie O'Donnell's movie "America" on the Lifetime channel, viewers couldn't help but notice the boarded-up buildings filmed on Detroit's tough streets. No need for fake slums, when you can find the real thing in Michigan's biggest city. The box office smash "Gran Torino" showed Metro Detroit's seedy side, too.

Then there's the drumming Congress gave Detroit's auto executives.

More folks, battered by the economy and blue from the bad news, are fleeing the state. And those left behind are often not doing well: Nearly 20 percent of the state's population is on some

form of public assistance, according to one report.

So it gets tougher and tougher to raise your hand and point to a spot on the mitten when folks ask where you're from.

The easy answer might be to hire a good public relations company to tout Michigan's strengths — the water, the sports teams (Lions excluded), the arts and the innovators.

But to some extent, the image reflects reality. State leaders can reverse the slide by getting ahead of the economic curve. They've ignored calls for fundamental change to the tax structure, the state's schools and its economic base.

Even Michigan's call for alternative energy is a me-too thing, copying other states and reflecting conventional wisdom du jour. Henry Ford didn't copy the American auto industry — he reinvented it.

Your children and grandchildren will work in jobs that haven't been invented yet.

Michigan — once a leader in so many areas — needs to climb back on top and make its name stand for something other than jokes.

Since more jobs are Priority One, a good start would be a business tax that creates a positive national buzz among industries. Shape it to attract all business to Michigan, not just filmmakers and others among the chosen few. That will up the odds that — when the next Henry Ford comes along — he'll be like the old Henry, doing his job-creating thing in Michigan.

If you orchestrate that reality, the positive image will follow.

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