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CEOs who attended last week's National Summit have some suggestions for the White House

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This one's for you, President Obama.

Last week's three-day National Summit in Detroit was all about getting fresh ideas to the new president and his advisers. Corporate bosses representing the likes of IBM, Microsoft and Citigroup -- not to mention Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Corp. -- joined a smattering of government and university leaders to chew over what's ailing America's economy.

Their short answer: a lot.

Far beyond the current recession lies a festering lack of American competitiveness.

Detroit's automotive woes are the least of it. America is losing ground in educational achievement, technical skill, public policy and along a host of other fronts.

Did the National Summit help? We may not know for a long time, until we see how policy and practice evolve. But the National Summit generated enough ideas to keep President Barack Obama's entire cabinet busy for a long time.

Beth Chappell, president and chief executive officer of the Detroit Economic Club and chief host of the summit, said a final report is to be ready in six to eight weeks. Then, Bill Ford Jr., executive chairman of Ford Motor Co. and one of the cochairmen of the summit, and cochairman Andrew Liveris, chairman and CEO of Dow Chemical, are to head to Washington, D.C., to push the agenda on the Obama administration. In the meantime, a lot of people who attended the summit left hungry for specifics. "The true measure of success for this conference should be judged by the ideas that eventually make it to the marketplace," said Ric Geyer, a local business consultant who attended. "And we won't know that answer for weeks, months or even years to come." For now, though, here's a quick review of the summit's main themes:

Technology

If the buzz at the summit is any indication, there's a lot riding on the emerging green economy. It's no secret that Gov. Jennifer Granholm and President Barack Obama have pinned their hopes for creating thousands of jobs on the shift to cleaner forms of energy and green homes, vehicles and products.

"We see this as the biggest opportunity for replacing a good chunk of those lost manufacturing jobs," Granholm said at the summit in a spirited, pro-Michigan address that would make any cheerleader proud.

Some executives at the summit also see going green as a way for businesses to rebuild the public's trust and confidence in the wake of financial scandals.

"Business leaders will need to engage more deeply with environmental and social issues," said Leonard Mendonca, chairman of McKinsey Global Institute.

Of course, if that's not a good enough reason to start treating the planet better, there's always the bottom line. Increasingly, businesses recognize that thinking green can add more green to their balance sheet.

"It's an opportunity to drive revenue, to drive profitability," said David Blood, who cofounded the investment firm Generation Investment Management with Al Gore.

Other ideas on energy and the environment: extend duration of alternative energy tax credits and establish a U.S. Green Products Council to create standards for environmentally-friendly products.

Manufacturing

OK, so the manufacturing track at the summit didn't produce a lot of new ideas.

A panel that featured former Michigan Gov. John Engler, now head of the National Association of Manufacturers, suggested tort reform, lower corporate taxes, health and pension reforms, and other agenda items long the focus of industry lobbying.

But, if the ideas weren't exactly fresh, what did come through was the sense of crisis. From the get-go, when Liveris called for a national industrial policy, the summit bubbled with calls for coordinated national action to help U.S. manufacturers.

What that might look like remained open to question. Certainly it could involve tougher enforcement of fair trade agreements so U.S. sellers don't get shut out of foreign markets.

"It's not about protectionism, but it is about making sure the rules are followed," U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., told a session.

That industrial policy might also include increased government support for basic research and a reform of the U.S. educational system so future workers are better prepared.

If the ideas were fuzzy or familiar, the cry from the heart was genuine: America must take the needs of its manufacturers a lot more seriously.

Government

Perhaps surprisingly for a lineup of speakers so dominated by private enterprise, no one denied that government has a significant role to play in the economy.

Acknowledgements of that role ranged from Ford's statement that the Obama administration "had to step in" to save auto companies from "catastrophic" failure to

various calls for government to enforce fair trade agreements and protect patents and copyrights against piracy.

"I think we're looking at a new era of cooperation and collaboration between business and government," Chappell told a news media audience.

What business wants and needs from government, she added, was threefold: stable and predictable policies, policies that align with the nation's long-term goals and a commitment to leave the selection of winners and losers to the marketplace.

Education

Education was not billed as a main theme of the summit. Yet some of the liveliest sessions and most specific suggestions came out of education panels.

Jay Noren, president of Wayne State University, bluntly told the summit that the nation's K-12 system was broken. "High school's not serious. It needs to be serious," he said. "Longer days, longer years."

Lou Anna K. Simon, president of Michigan State University, encouraged students to start their own companies, even while in school.

And Mary Sue Coleman, president of the University of Michigan, said universities need to work more closely with businesses large and small.

A student's view

A large student contingent attended the summit. Joshua Loenshal, a 23-year-old business student at Northwood University's Grand Rapids satellite campus, said the conference has inspired him to incorporate sustainable practices into his life.

Loenshal attended the summit in lieu of taking a management class. After graduation, he said he wants to start an alternative energy company in Michigan.

"I like the opposing views and the interactions on the panels," he said.

In particular, he was surprised to learn that green products can be classified as light green, green and dark green.

Ideas for future summits

For a first-time event, the National Summit ran remarkably smoothly. Chappell kept the sessions running on time. The large number of volunteers proved helpful with directions and such.

Scheduling the summit so soon after the annual Mackinac Policy Conference (held in late May) had a few people grumbling about the demands of making two such conferences back-to-back.

And some urged that any future summit include a broader range of speakers. Instead of a CEO-heavy lineup, some hoped to engage the community more by hearing from labor, nonprofit and others beyond the corporate boardroom.