

Detroit Free Press

June 21, 2009

Educate and innovate was the idea at summit

BY STEPHEN HENDERSON • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Henry Ford didn't invent the car. He just put it within reach of the average American.

He didn't invent the assembly line, either -- he just perfected it, thereby increasing the efficiency of building cars and greatly decreasing the cost.

He was a man of ideas, not inventions. And his ideas propelled this city, this state, and much of this nation through a grand century of prosperity derived from innovation.

But it has been a long time since Detroit was thought of as a place from which great notions emerge. As Ford's thinking produced an economy and culture based on making things, Michigan began to devalue education -- the fuel that feeds the creative instinct. And so we got a little lazy -- gorging off the spoils of Ford's great contributions, without investing in the intellectual infrastructure that might produce the next big idea.

A goal and a challenge

A refocusing on ideas -- that lead to innovations that lead to products that lead to jobs and to wealth -- was, I think, the principal virtue of the National Summit sponsored last week by the Detroit Economic Club. Participants even dared to submit that the best ideas for America's future -- in green technology, energy, manufacturing and environment -- can once again come from Detroit.

On that score, the summit was a success, despite criticism that it was more talk than action. You're not going to change an economy and the culture it spawned in a week. (There will be a "to-do" list generated from the Summit in the near future, and U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke said in his remarks that the White House is anxious to see it.)

Any fair look at the summit has to acknowledge the symbolic importance of all those CEOs and thought and policy leaders coming together to share their best ideas -- and the fact that it could and should be the first of many. If we do this once a year, and build in more concrete actions in between, the summit could

become a real incubator for ideas and ultimately a springboard for positive change.

Ballmer says it best

Of all the speakers who participated last week, I think Microsoft CEO and Detroit native Steve Ballmer best captured the true spirit of the summit.

"The challenge here in Detroit (is) to remember why America has been so good at innovation for so long," said Ballmer, who runs one of the most innovative, recognizable and successful companies in global history. "And to really take steps to ensure that new ideas continue to flourish in this country and in this area. That's key for creating growth and opportunity for our companies, for our communities, for our citizens."

Advertisement

Detroit Country Day grad Ballmer said we have to "deepen our commitment to innovation by investing more in research and taking a longer term view of the role that innovation plays in creating business success."

What does that mean?

"Fundamentally, investing in innovation is about investing in people," Ballmer said in his speech Wednesday. "It's about hiring people, developing people, letting them do their best work. It's about aligning people's creativity and imagination, and encouraging people to dream up new ideas and to discover new ways of doing things.

"Our workforce is the reason this country has been so good at innovation for so long, and the strength of our workforce depends on one thing: the quality of the education system."

Ballmer pointed out what a lousy job we've been doing -- in Michigan and around the country -- with education. As he put it, we're "failing" our children, which means schools are failing to produce the idea leaders we need.

We're failing to produce the 21st Century Henry Ford.

It wouldn't be the worst thing if Ballmer's observation was the one big idea we all took away from the National Summit.