



EDITORIAL: Begin building national recovery here in Detroit

January 15, 2009

As President-elect Barack Obama attempts to engineer a national economic recovery, he might as well start at Ground Zero. That would be here -- Detroit and Michigan -- which are home to the nation's highest unemployment rate, an auto industry that's propped up by federal crutches and the epicenter of America's manufacturing struggles.

No better place for Obama to deliver a message of change and hope -- and no better event than the National Summit, which the Detroit Economic Club will convene June 15-17 at Ford Field. A commitment from the Obama White House for not just a presidential appearance but also the active engagement of administration officials with the many CEOs expected to attend would assure the summit the national attention it deserves, reassure the business community that the new president wants to help, and guarantee that the summit has an impact on public policy.

As a purely practical matter, Obama and his cabinet members can meet with business leaders individually or in small groups over the next few months, or they climb aboard Air Force One for a short flight to Detroit and deal with up to 200 of them under one roof, plus hearing out and exchanging ideas with experts, entrepreneurs and innovators in the summit's four areas: technology, energy, environment and manufacturing. Obama has been very publicly committed to progress in all four areas. Simple efficiency would dictate the summit in Detroit is the place to get seriously rolling on all of them.

The summit's goals are tangible: Assessing the major challenges in each of the four areas, developing "must do" policies that will foster U.S. economic growth, and matching innovators and entrepreneurs with CEOs and capital.

Shortly after Obama won election last year, he received a personal invitation from Ford Chairman Bill Ford Jr. to attend the National Summit. CEOs already confirmed not just to attend but to participate are from the energy, technology, communication and, of course, transportation sectors, many of whom have spoken in the past at the Detroit Economic Club and know what a leading national forum it is for the exchange of ideas.

In a May 2007 speech to the DEC, when Obama was still just hoping to become president, he invoked the "Arsenal of Democracy" that Detroit became during World War II when its auto factories shifted almost overnight to turning out tanks and planes.

"In an astonishingly short period of time, the auto industry and its workers became one of the nation's most important contributors," he said. "... It was a miracle that was distinctly American -- the idea that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can rise to meet its greatest challenges. It's the kind of American miracle we need today."

And Detroit, again, stands ready.