

September 29, 2009

<http://detroitnews.com/article/20090929/OPINION03/909290351>

Perception keeps residents grounded

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Why do you live where you do?

In other cities, this might be an academic question. In Metro Detroit, the mounting challenges to existence make the question more urgent. With Detroit's "tragedy" splashed on Time magazine's cover, its plight the subject of constant media scrutiny, there's never been a more poignant moment to try to understand why we live here.

But the answers don't come easily.

A study released this morning -- "Soul of the Community," commissioned by the Knight Foundation and conducted by the Gallup polling organization -- examines the mindsets of 26 American communities, trying to ferret the unseen forces that compel residents to attach and stay in their areas, to love where they live.

Things looking better

The best news is Detroiters are more optimistic than we were a year ago: We're more hopeful about the future, likelier to say things will be better here within five years.

We're also feeling more open to diversity -- to minorities, gays and immigrants -- than last year, the first of the three-year survey of communities from Akron, Ohio, and Duluth, Minn., to Charlotte, N.C., and Palm Beach, Fla.

But Detroit is not a Pollyannaish town, and the survey tapped into a very real sense of alienation and concern.

The region ranked in the bottom seven cities among those whose disaffection with their cities and lack of strong bonds created a community deemed "unattached."

Our biggest concerns were predictable: the lack of jobs and unemployment (39 percent, compared to 13 percent overall in the other cities), the economy (23 percent vs. 7 percent) and crime/violence/gangs (Detroiters actually scored lower -- 17 percent -- than the total survey average of 28 percent).

Kurt Metzger, director of the Detroit Area Community Information System, a data research center funded by foundations, calls the new study's results "realistic," after reviewing some of the results last week.

The study's authors argue that a strong sense of civic engagement creates better places to live -- places where people put energy and commitment into their cities, where a positive buzz draws others to live and work there. At the moment, this sort of energy does not characterize Detroit.

Aesthetics are key

"One surprise," says Katherine Loflin, lead consultant on the project, "was that younger people, 18 to 34, showed a rise in community attachment."

That's intriguing because only 5 percent of respondents thought the Detroit area is welcoming to young, college-educated adults. The survey polled 1,500 residents of Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston, Lapeer

and St. Clair counties by phone from February to April.

Metro Detroiters also showed an uptick over last year in their enjoyment of the area's aesthetics -- parks, green spaces and recreational opportunities. That suggests investments in bike paths such as the Detroit RiverWalk can make a real difference.

Perception, this study argues, is reality.

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