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David:

I trust things are going good at Oberlin.

I graduated in 1994. I was almost surely going to move to New York City or Washington, DC when I graduated. At kind of the last second, I decided to do “the big city thing” in Detroit. I was very committed to making the world a better place, Detroit is famous for its social, economic and racial problems, and so I decided to go to work here, where it was needed the most.

It’s been an interesting eleven years, full of adventures, fun, successes, failures and learning truths. It is the most important thing I have done in my life. I volunteer my time with a small non-profit group called Cityscape Detroit. Cityscape is a group that advocates for good urban planning, adaptive reuse of old buildings, green spaces, pedestrian friendliness, mass transit and improving the “built environment” in Detroit. More information is available at www.cityscapedetroit.org.

There is an area of Detroit called the Eastern Market. The Eastern Market is well known in Southeast Michigan. It is an open-air market where every weekend thousands of Detroiters flock to buy produce. In a city where a lot of things don’t work so well, the popularity and continued success of the Eastern Market is impressive. It is an area several blocks long with sheds where vendors back their trucks up and sell produce, flowers, etc. to people who walk down the middle on foot. The sheds are surrounded by storefronts and buildings that house specialty shops for things like spices and meat. I believe the shed vendors only sell to restaurants during the week, but it is open to the public on weekends. The area is not real polished, but it remains popular.

I believe most of the people who shop there think they are buying locally grown fruits and vegetables from area farmers, but all of the vendors in the sheds are reselling lettuce, tomatoes, apples, oranges, etc. shipped in from California, Arizona, Florida by the large produce importers in the area.

I see an opportunity here for a graduating ENVS student or group of ENVS friends. I see the chance to create a “win-win-win-win.” Those are the best kind of deals.

Someone should open a store in the Eastern Market that sells locally grown and/or organically grown produce. This is an area that is growing rapidly in popularity, and no one is currently doing it. There are a number of vacant buildings and stores in the surrounding area that could house such a business. It would be a great way for a young, confident, pro-environment person(s) to make a living.

This plan has many advantages:

- A graduating ENVS student or student(s) who need a job get a job
- Environmental:
 - Save the cost and waste of raising, transporting and selling agri-business produce
 - Organically raised food is less damaging to the environment and human beings than food raised with pesticides
 - Michigan has a lot of farms and local farmers would be supported
 - A great chance to “spread the gospel” about environmentalism and organically and locally raised produce
- It would help grow the economy of an impoverished place
- It would possibly save an old building
- It would create a “cool” business in a place that has a bad reputation, thereby resulting in some spin-off social and economic benefits.

I can't provide much help with this plan. There are some community development groups in the area who can provide some assistance with projects like this. I could provide introductions to urban planners, architects, quasi-public development agency people, etc. If a graduate(s) were to do this, they would have to have some “business sense” to handle the related book-balancing, marketing, etc. duties. I could help write the business plan. Graduates would probably have to work for other people for a year or more in order to get the lay of the land, make connections and put the plan together.

This is an ambitious plan, but a good, exciting, fun and important one for the right Oberlin student(s). Please post this in the hall outside the ENVS offices and see if this resonates with anyone. They are free to call or e-mail me with questions. E-mail akoper@ameritech.net or call in the evening: (313) 554-1060.

Thanks,

Andrew Koper, OC '94