

Crain's Cleveland Business

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OPINION

Action Now

The consortium of philanthropic organizations known as The Fund for Our Economic Future last week unveiled Advance Northeast Ohio, its action plan for promoting economic development on a regional basis. Its goal is "to build a brighter future for our cities, villages, towns and all of our residents," according to a press release announcing the plan.

Heaven knows we could use *something* to brighten Northeast Ohio's future, because the trend line of the recent past isn't particularly sunny.

The U.S. Census Bureau last month issued its latest population estimates for counties nationwide, and the numbers here are disheartening. They show an area where most counties can be deemed population winners as people shuffled from one community to another within the region, but where the region as a whole suffered a net population decline.

The Census Bureau estimates that Cuyahoga County's population as of last July 1 had fallen by 79,604, or 5.7%, from the level recorded in the 2000 census. The six counties contiguous to Cuyahoga (Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage and Summit) as well as Stark and Wayne counties all experienced population gains over that same period, though only three - Geauga, Lorain and Medina could boast of increases larger than 2.5%. The gains of all eight counties totaled 56,595, leaving a net loss of just over 23,000 people from the area.

The point of this exercise is to show that even the area's fastest-growing county population-wise Medina, at 12.1% over the aforementioned period - shouldn't feel too secure about its future because it largely has benefited from Cuyahoga County's losses *rather than* an influx of *people* and employers from outside Northeast Ohio.

If individual counties in these parts are to prosper over the long haul, then Northeast Ohio must be a place where businesses are growing and the labor pool can meet the needs of employers. Enter the Advance *Northeast Ohio* action plan.

The plan reflects the desire of The Fund for Our Economic Future to encourage collaboration among the region's public, private and philanthropic sectors toward goals that range from increasing business and employment opportunities for minorities and the unskilled to creating a giant fund to address the region's need for an estimated \$375 million in *seed and early-stage capital for promising new businesses*.

Execution of the plan relies in part on the continued efforts of existing support organizations, such as the bioscience advocacy group BioEnterprise Corp. and the early-stage investment group jumpStart Inc. However, backers of the plan also want to see whether certain local programs - such as the Stark Education Partnership, a collaborative effort to raise educational attainment in Stark County - can and should be implemented on a regional basis.

The involvement of 85 foundations with *the fund*

indicates that this initiative will have staying power. That's good, because many of *the* goals in the action plan will take years to achieve. It's also good that the foundations no longer are content with being spectator piggybanks. We applaud their active hands in working to bolster the region's fortunes.