



## Editorial: Gathering place: New downtown should bring community together

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By **Paula Holmes-Greeley** | **The Muskegon Chronicle**

It was disquieting to learn from an analysis of 2010 Census data that Muskegon is among the most segregated communities in the nation.

According to the data, the Muskegon-Norton Shores Metropolitan Statistical area is the sixth most racially divided Metropolitan Statistical Area in the country. That puts this community on par with some of the largest — and most troubled — urban areas in the country, including Milwaukee, New York, Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland. And the violence, drug issues and unemployment plaguing those cities are things Muskegon experienced as well last spring and summer.

According to the Brown University analysis, on a scale of zero to 100, with zero being completely integrated and 100 being completely segregated, Muskegon scored a 71.2 in 2010. That's down from 76.4 in 2000 and 76.8 in 1990, but close to 74.1 in 1980.

African-American, non-Hispanic residents make up 14 percent of the county's 172,188 residents, but they live in about one-quarter of the county's 42 census tracts.

"Muskegon stands out not so much for where it started in 1980, but for the fact that it hasn't changed much," said John Logan, director of the university's US2010 Census project.

That's a pretty harsh assessment of the community. But rather than dwell on the fact that most Muskegon neighborhoods don't reflect the diversity of the overall community, residents need to look for ways to come together.

And that brings added importance to the way Muskegon develops its new downtown.

It can be dangerous when a community lives separately. Residents start to see issues in terms of us and them. They draw lines. They forget that we're all in this together.

By focusing on downtown as a place where the community can draw from the strengths of its various cultures and celebrate that rich diversity, the area can create a harmony that comes from naturally developing, longtime integrated neighborhoods.

As Nelson Neighborhood resident Elaine Klemm told The Chronicle about life in her diverse community, "You can get different ideas from different people; you learn about different cultures."

So, what would create a downtown that emphasizes the community's common interests and provides opportunities for different neighborhoods to come together?

The city already is started down the right path. The museums, symphony, library, performing arts center and arena all are strong anchors that invite the entire community downtown. People in charge of programming should continue to strive for a wide variety of acts. In addition, Hackley Park and the Olthoff street stage create opportunities for local presentations.

The placement of Baker College downtown and the proposal to develop part of the Muskegon Community College campus downtown also creates a place where the community can gather together, both for classes and events.

The restaurants and bars that continue to develop to serve cultural event participants and students add a third place to gather. Soon they will be serving the new residents moving into both the townhouses and condos.

The final piece will be to create a unique shopping area mixed with offices that will help create customers for the stores. Again, the city is on its way in that area, too.

The 2020 Census may not find much change in the diversity of Muskegon's neighborhoods either, but hopefully it will find diversity in the community's attitude and in the way it works and plays together.

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