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Moving Forward: The Future of America's Auto Communities

by [Jay Williams](#) on [January 12, 2012](#) · [0 comments](#)

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Some of you may know that I spent most of this week in Michigan. Last night as we flew back to D.C., I had the opportunity to speak with a member of my staff about all the innovation we saw, all of the conversations we were a part of, and all of the energy we felt over the last few days. But those blessed with the opportunity to serve within government shouldn't be the only ones who get to share in these conversations. So I wanted to share this quick recap of the trip with everyone.

My trip kicked off on Monday at the [North American International Auto Show in Detroit](#) with a tour alongside [Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood](#). I wasn't at the show back in 2010, but I kept hearing that the climate then was a little subdued. This year, there was a renewed energy and buzz, both for the show and the industry. As we visited the exhibits, the crowds were celebrating the resurgence of the American auto industry.

That afternoon, I drove up to meet with local officials in Pontiac, Michigan and learn about some of the issues they are facing. Like other communities across the Midwest, Pontiac has seen auto manufacturing jobs decline dramatically. Due to a number of plant closures over the years, the city now hosts fewer than 3,000 automotive workers — down from about 40,000. However, the city remains hopeful and optimistic. Community leaders are working together to define what kind of community Pontiac will become in the future and they are looking into every available measure and resource to survive.

In Pontiac, I also met with a local businessman who is redeveloping former auto sites into new economic drivers for the community. We visited a 420,000 square foot office building shuttered by GM which is now home to one of the most compelling movie studios in the country — Raleigh Michigan Studios. This facility is creating new jobs in a new industry that the region can build on moving forward. In fact, the feature film “Oz the Great and Powerful” just wrapped filming.

Tuesday, it was back to the auto show with [Energy Secretary Steven Chu](#) for a tour and meetings with key industry leaders and stakeholders, including the chief technology officers and vice presidents from several automakers.

On Wednesday, I had the opportunity to speak with the Suppliers Partnership for the Environment, an organization dedicated to supporting the continued growth of America's network of auto suppliers – the companies of all sizes that together make up the fabric of auto communities across the country. I also met with the Automotive Communities Partnership, a unique program that brings together community leaders, industry leaders, and other stakeholders with the goal of sustaining and growing the region's automotive endowment. My message to both: this office and this administration remain committed to seeing the American automotive industry return, and bring with it good manufacturing jobs across the country.

Throughout the trip I was able to see the strides our automotive industries and communities continue to take. To be sure, the automotive industry has experienced some good news recently – adding 11,000 jobs last month and more than 100,000 total in 2011. Since June 2009, the automotive industry has added back more than 170,000 jobs, the best period of job growth in more than a decade.

This is welcomed growth and shouldn't come as any surprise to those who were able to see innovation center stage at the Auto Show. American cars are not only utilizing more advanced, greener technologies, but they are also rolling works of art. This was clear at the Detroit Auto Show with products like the 2013 Ford Fusion – a mid-size sedan that offers better gas mileage than sub-compact cars of just a few years ago and a car that contains more consumer technology than many American households.

It is important to our economy that the auto industry continues to make progress, but it is important to our country that auto communities continue to do the same. Cities like Pontiac are bringing the important local, state and federal stakeholders together to discuss how best to

meet the difficult challenges ahead. These conversations are not easy, and solutions will not happen overnight, but by coming together and working toward a vision for the future, these communities will succeed because the end product will be created by continued effort and input by the folks on the ground.

The federal government cannot and should not dictate what is best for a place like Pontiac, but as our communities continue to move forward, our dedicated federal partners like Secretary LaHood, Secretary Chu, our very own Secretary Hilda Solis, and the rest of the administration continue to believe that encouraging innovation in the auto industry and supporting the revitalization of auto communities are crucial to re-building America's middle class. That's a conversation I always like having.

Jay Williams is Director of the Office of Recovery for Auto Communities and Workers.

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