

July 13, 2009

Dear President Obama,

Your administration has reported that 400,000 jobs in the auto industry have been lost during the economic downturn. Though some jobs have been saved, many more will be lost through the bankruptcy restructuring implemented by the Auto Task Force at Chrysler and GM. Economists are predicting a slow recovery at best and, in any event, the market for autos and trucks will remain diminished for years to come. We in Detroit and in the automobile and manufacturing centers throughout the Midwest are faced with a major crisis for which a comprehensive solution is required.

We believe that the economic crisis is interwoven with an environmental one - that, in the words of NASA scientist Jim Hansen, we face an "irreversible tipping point" if we don't act swiftly to reduce our carbon footprint and therefore positively impact global climate change. We believe this fact requires rethinking our country's manufacturing priorities. Instead of laying off workers and devastating working-class communities, we believe the combination of crises demands a bold proposal that can put people back to work and address global climate change. We believe this can be done, and done creatively.

Until the recent fall in vehicle sales, auto use was contributing 20% of all annual U.S. greenhouse gas emissions (more than four tons per person) and 40% of all U.S. oil consumption. Yet of the 90% of Americans who drove to work in 2007, 76% drove alone. Fewer than 5% used public transportation. Eighty percent of the total U.S. population lives in metropolitan areas, with 30% in the cities. Yet few cities outside New York City have an adequate system of public transportation.

Clearly we must turn from an energy-inefficient, auto-centered society to one that increasingly uses mass transit along with energy-efficient vehicles. That means prioritizing buses, light rail, high-speed trains and the tracks they run on. Manufacturing also needs to be geared toward building wind and water turbines as well as solar panels. Instead of attempting to resuscitate automobile companies, we should be building a Transportation and Energy Industry for the 21st century.

Your administration has taken a positive first step by creating two blue ribbon task forces; The White House Task Force on Middle Class Families, called "Promoting American Manufacturing in the 21st Century", chaired by Vice-President Biden, and the "White House Council on Automotive Communities and Workers", under the leadership of Labor Secretary, Hilda Solis and Larry Summers, your Chief Economic Advisor. You have charged them with the tasks of preparing American industry for the future and supporting "manufacturing communities and workers."

We welcome these initiatives and urge you to ensure that the size of the ideas being considered match the size of the problems we face. The problems confronting us must be addressed holistically, the leadership must be visionary in its approach and the solutions must be innovative and far-reaching rather than politically expedient crisis management. To that end, we offer the following ideas:

First, because we the people are now major stockholders in GM and Chrysler, we believe that it would be in the national interest to assume direct ownership of the GM and Chrysler plants that are closed or closing (as interest on our investment) to expedite the retooling and conversion of these plants for the manufacture of the products that we have mentioned above.

We must start now, so that by 2010 we will be well on our way to creating the jobs of tomorrow. We have the facilities, the equipment, the skilled workers to be able to complete this in record time. All we need is the political will to do so.

We know this is not a pipe dream because it was at the start of U.S. involvement in World War II that a massive conversion of existing auto plants for war-time production was completed in just eight months. The obstacles that had to be overcome were not technical, but political. It behooves you and your administration to take on the threat of global climate change - and the dislocations in the automobile industry - with the same sense of urgency and gravity that President Franklin Roosevelt acted upon then.

Additionally, it is our understanding that Chrysler and GM own a large number of patents for green technology. We encourage a thorough review of these patents and believe that any technology that GM and Chrysler own that they have no plans on utilizing in the next three years, be appropriated (again, as interest on investment) and uses found for these technologies.

Your administration is in a position at this moment of great peril, to create a new paradigm - for addressing the US role in industrial manufacturing and taking the lead on combating global warming. We urge that - in this defining moment - you reiterate your pledge that "yes we can!"