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Tom Walsh: The best Michigan business stories of 2011

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Founder and Chairman of Quicken Loans Dan Gilbert celebrates moving 1,500 employees to downtown Detroit. / MANDI WRIGHT/Detroit Free Press



By Tom Walsh Detroit Free Press Business Columnist

Entering the final week of the year, let's reflect today on Michigan's 10 Best Business Stories of 2011.

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Notice that I say the 10 "best" -- not the 10 biggest, or 10 most important or 10 most sensational.

The intent is not to ignore looming fiscal challenges or chronic unemployment, but rather to celebrate promise amid all the anxiety. So without further throat-clearing, here, in alphabetical order, are the 10 Best.



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- **Chrysler's amazing survival act.** Very nearly left for dead amid the carnage of 2009, Chrysler vehicle sales are up 25% this year, thanks in part to the inspired Super Bowl ad with Eminem that launched the "Imported from Detroit" campaign.

- **Cobo gets a makeover.** After years of yapping and scandal, Cobo Center finally gets a long-delayed expansion and makeover. Gutting of the old Cobo Arena, where all-star Pistons guard Dave

Bing once did his basketball thing, is under way -- and Cobo's regional governing authority shows promise as a model for elusive collaboration among area cities and counties.

- **Gilbert gobbles up more of downtown Detroit.** After moving his Quicken Loans headquarters downtown from Livonia last year, founder and chairman Dan Gilbert bought the Chase Tower and the First National, Dime, and Madison Theatre buildings, plus a major parking garage and a couple other structures near Grand Circus Park. After moving 1,700 employees into the city last year, Quicken and its affiliated companies brought another 1,500 downtown in 2011 and plan to add another 1,000 early in 2012.

- **Healthy hospitals:** A decade ago, Detroit's biggest hospital groups, Detroit Medical Center and Henry Ford Health System, were gushing red ink, with hundreds of millions of dollars in losses. Under comebacks led by respective CEOs Mike Duggan and Nancy Schlichting, both are now investing heavily in Detroit's Midtown and winning national accolades. HFH was a Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award winner in 2011, and DMC was named last week as one of 32 hospital systems nationwide to pioneer the new Accountable Care Organization program for treating Medicare patients.

- **Lions and Tigers, oh my!** Nothing lights up a city center like a few winning sports teams. A division win and playoff appearance by the Tigers, followed by the Lions' first winning season in 11 years -- along with the reliably strong Red Wings -- drew thousands of extra fans into the stadiums, restaurants and downtown nightlife spots this year.

- **Michigan Business Tax, R.I.P.:** New Gov. Rick Snyder wasted no time with his reinvention plan, killing the hated Michigan Business Tax in one of his first acts and moving to simplify and solidify the state's fiscal position. Now, will it generate jobs and spur investment?

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Interior demolition is under way at Cobo Arena as part of remaking it as a dual-level exhibition hall and ballroom. / PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press

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- **Palace and Pistons**, changing of the guard. New owner Tom Gores, Michigan State grad and private equity billionaire, bought the team from Bill Davidson's widow Karen but had to wait for the end of the NBA lockout to start the season. Meanwhile, he installed a new management team under Dennis Mannion to juice up the fan experience at the Palace. Rebuilding the team may take a little longer.

- **Perrigo surges**. Tucked quietly away in the southwest Michigan town of Allegan, pill maker Perrigo has been one of the big investment stories of 2011. Its stock recently zoomed past the \$100-per-share mark, up from \$66 early this year and under \$20 back in 1999. The maker of store-brand over-the-counter medications for Wal-Mart, Target and other retailers, Perrigo also expanded into generic pharmaceuticals and infant formula.

- **UAW's new deal**. Workers at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler ratify a landmark four-year contract that makes the Detroit Three more competitive with foreign rivals than they've been since the 1980s. In return for restraint on wages and benefits, workers share big in the upside if the automakers turn solid profits.

- **Wolverines bounce back**: With former Domino's Pizza CEO Dave Brandon as athletic director, University of Michigan sports staged a solid revival in 2011. After three years of football funk under Rich Rodriguez, new coach Brady Hoke led the Wolverines back into the Top 20 national rankings and a BCS bowl game this year while Brandon finished off a Big House expansion and launched a \$52-million renovation of the Crisler Arena basketball digs.

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