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Hamilton can't help but prosper given its location in the midst of one of the world's most powerful economic engines, says urban studies guru Richard Florida.

"I think Hamilton, in the context of the greater Toronto explosion, has already turned a corner.... You can't help but be part of a boom, you can't really miss," said the high-profile University of Toronto professor famous for developing the concept of the "creative class" fuelling the growth of cities.

Florida was the keynote speaker at a daylong economic summit at the Ancaster Old Mill hosted by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. About 125 civic leaders attended.

He's clumsily dubbed the region stretching from Waterloo, through to Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and down into New York State Tor-Buff-Chester.

It is among the fastest-growing of what Florida calls the world's 40 "mega-regions."

It's bigger than Silicon Valley, Greater Paris, Hong Kong and Shanghai, and its economic might is equal to more than half of all of Canada's, says Florida.

"Do not think of Hamilton or the Greater Hamilton region as an independent actor," Florida told the crowd.

"You are part of a much greater story."

Hamilton's mega-region is among the top 10 in the world, which together account for 43 per cent of the world's economic activity and more than half of its patented innovations, while home to just 6.5 per cent of the population.

But Florida cautions that Hamilton can still make mistakes on the road to economic prosperity, pointing to tearing down old buildings, failing to focus on innovation and research collaborations and allowing what he calls the old-style thinking of "squelchers" to stand in the way.

He says cities must attract and nurture creative talent by fostering a culture of inclusion, openness and civic engagement, capitalizing on their natural landscapes and preserving and celebrating their history.

A creative workforce is key to today's economy, he said.

The modern economy has undergone a more dramatic and powerful transformation than during the Industrial Revolution, Florida told a rapt audience at the summit.

It's no longer about machines or muscle, but the power of the human mind to create and innovate, he said.

The creative sector, in which Florida includes arts, culture, media, design, scientists, health care and business, accounts for as much as 40 per cent of the economy. It was 15 per cent just 27 years ago.

Progressive and successful companies understand people don't follow jobs. Instead, they relocate to cities that combine a strong culture of innovation and research with a desirable quality of life.

Yesterday, Hamilton's most powerful voices in business, the arts, government, social services, health and education called for "breathtaking" change and a reinvention of Hamilton's image at the first-ever economic summit.

After hearing the revitalization success stories of other cities hard hit by manufacturing losses, such as Cleveland and Sheffield, England, the participants broke into 13 groups to hash out targets.

All agreed Hamilton can do much better than its current ranking of 15th in the Conference Board of Canada benchmarks of Canada's 27 biggest cities ranked in seven areas, including economy, environment, health and education.

In fact, many participants said Hamilton should commit to landing in the top five, some said in as little as three to five years.

They called for an independent economic development corporation, downtown redevelopment, continued waterfront revitalization, a focus on transportation links and a commitment to business attraction and retention.

Virtually each group spoke about the need to change Hamilton's image as a faltering industrial city paralyzed by conflict and indecision. They said Hamilton must celebrate itself, recreate its sense of pride and stop listening to the naysayers.

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, which hosted yesterday's event, has committed to creating a secretariat to follow up on initiatives and momentum generated yesterday. A progress report will be presented at a second forum a year from now.

Many participants said the timing is right to get the city moving forward.

"This is the kind of energy and enthusiasm that this city needs," Mayor Fred Eisenberger told the summit.

"I believe wholeheartedly that this city is headed to a better place. All we need to do is accelerate it."

Hamilton International Airport CEO Richard Koroscil was a key champion of the summit. He said he became frustrated by the lack of progress in a city where he saw so much potential, when he moved here four years ago.

Yesterday, he saw a strong consensus to move forward.

"No one said they were happy with where we are. Everyone wants to move the yardstick."

Summit co-chair Ron Foxcroft said Hamilton has suffered in the past from a lack of courage, innovation and vision, but that the event was a "slam dunk."

"I'm committed. It starts tomorrow. The idea is one per cent. Implementation is 99 per cent, and everyone here today is talking about that."

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