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OPINION

Inside Report for July 17, 2007



Add issues of diversity, gays in agenda

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There are many good reasons Portland, Ore., is one of America's most admired cities. With a vibrant economy and a high quality of life, it has become almost a poster child for New Urbanism in the United States. There is a social, not merely a physical dimension, to the qualities that make the city successful, and thus a September destination for a delegation of Baton Rouge civic leaders.

Portland prides itself on welcoming outsiders of all sorts. Portland was one of the top five cities on a "gay friendly" index used by Richard Florida to analyze how a city attracts top talent.

Several familiar cities are at the top of any list of high-tech centers, including San Francisco, Boston and Seattle.

Smaller cities such as Portland and Tampa, Fla., were on that top five list and are also attracting creative professionals in the technology industries.

A new analysis by Richard Florida and Charlotta Mellander — he is a professor of public policy at George Mason University,

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she a Ph.D. candidate from a Swedish university — finds the impact of “Bohemian” cultures such as artists, writers and gay communities are of vital economic importance, despite the small size of those populations compared to the United States population as a whole.

“Places that were open to gay and lesbian people were also the kind of places that could attract not only smart young people, but also Indian and Chinese immigrants who come here and start a lot of high tech companies,” Florida told CNN recently.

Many people don’t want to talk about diversity, much less gay issues, in terms of economic development: One of the arguments often made is if Baton Rouge generates good-paying jobs, the diverse populations will flow in.

This is a subtle way of denigrating the idea of diversity, for if diversity is a function of economic growth and not a driver, then there is no need to address uncomfortable social questions such as anti-gay prejudices in Baton Rouge.

The analysis by Florida and his co-authors in other publications makes the case that it is the open-mindedness of successful cities that has allowed economic opportunities to emerge.

The Florida-Mellander paper is available on the Internet at <http://www.creativeclass.org>, under the working papers section. Its pucky headline: “There Goes the Neighborhood.”

On a prosaic level, it’s almost a given that “cool” populations such as those in Florida’s “Bohemian Index” are indicators a neighborhood’s cool-factor is high, and property values are likely to follow.

The new analysis argues the economic implications of coolness on property values holds true for all sorts of cities.

A broader economic implication of diversity is in the way a community approaches innovation. There is an “open-culture premium” for the broader community, not just the “cool” neighborhoods.

The Florida-Mellander paper puts it in economists’ phrases: “This tolerance or open culture premium acts on the demand side by reducing barriers to entry for human capital; increasing the efficiencies of human capital externalities and knowledge spillovers; promoting self-expression and new idea generation; and facilitating entrepreneurial mobilization of resources, thus acting on regional income and real estate prices.”

A little more accessible translation: It’s not who you are, it’s what you do. If a community eschews prejudice against its nontraditional populations, it will be more attractive to the creative and talented individuals who want to achieve more economically.

That has to be an issue explicitly on the table when the delegation organized by the Baton Rouge Area Chamber goes to Portland.

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