

Assets to Las Vegas' growth: Casinos, e-tailers

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International casino companies and online shoe retailers have more in common than you would think.

Both are rooted in customer service, treating guests and shoppers well to cement their loyalty.

And businesses should look to both as symbols of Las Vegas' economic future, said Richard Florida, a University of Toronto professor and author of the urban development treatises "Rise of the Creative Class" and "The Great Reset." Florida will be a featured speaker at the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce's annual economic forum, Preview, on Feb. 9 from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Thomas and Mack Center.

Florida told the Review-Journal that the city's resorts and Zappos.com, which is moving its corporate headquarters from Henderson to downtown Las Vegas in 2013, will be assets as Las Vegas attempts to diversify its economy. The \$1 billion e-retailer has consulted with Florida's firm, the Creative Class Group, according to Fortune magazine.

"Other companies in their industry pay low wages, don't treat their workers very well, don't engage them," Florida said. "Upgrading service work, paying service workers better, engaging their capabilities -- that is an example not only for Las Vegas, but could be a signal project that other cities feel inspired by."

Long gone are the days of an economy dependent on manufacturing and production, and of communities created by fleeing to suburbs. In his books and speeches, Florida describes the transition to a knowledge- and creativity-based economy and the rise of a "creative class" of people who are congregating in urban cores.

That creative class goes beyond musicians, artists and coffee shop baristas. Las Vegas' economy is service-based. That won't change overnight, but Florida said businesses can do more to attract workers and make jobs creatively fulfilling.

"The application of creativity can occur in many different professions. I think I'll be challenging the chamber on that -- why not begin sharing and developing practices and programs and strategies, learning from Zappos and some of the big gaming companies, and helping our country learn how to make service jobs better jobs?" Florida said.

Downtown redevelopment and concentrating Las Vegas' growth in and up rather than sprawling

out will also be part of the city's destiny. In an article last year in USA Today, Florida named Las Vegas' Fremont East Entertainment District as one of 10 up-and-coming downtown neighborhoods to watch. Also making the list were New York City's Chelsea and Chicago's Wicker Park.

"We're resetting the way we live. Across the country, we see exurbs and suburbs starting to shrink and population beginning to shift toward the core," Florida said. "You have this anchor company called Zappos (moving downtown), and not only building a headquarters but investing in housing, mixed-use projects, cafes, bars, restaurants. I think it's happening. It has a long way to go."

So how long, exactly, will it take to redevelop downtown and diversify the Las Vegas economy?

"When I was asked by Tony (Hsieh) and (former Mayor) Oscar (Goodman), I said a generation. Tony said, 'We don't have a generation. We're going to do this in five years.' You have a very aggressive set of actors who want to accelerate the process," Florida said.

Those actors could include chamber members. About 2,000 chamber members and business owners are expected to attend Preview, which includes economic forecasts and a trade show.

"We think Richard Florida's message and research is particularly interesting as we are engaging in economic diversification and redeveloping our urban core," said chamber spokeswoman Cara Roberts.

Also speaking at the event are Brookings Mountain West Director Robert Lang, Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority President and Chief Executive Officer Rossi Ralenkotter, analyst Jeremy Aguero and Mayor Carolyn Goodman and Oscar Goodman .

Tickets are \$60 for chamber members; \$80 for others. To purchase tickets: 641-5822 or www.lvchamber.com.

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