

Author Richard Florida explains 'creative' theory of drawing jobs



Richard Florida, author of the "The Rise of the Creative Class," speaks at BizTech.

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Published: Friday, January 14, 2011 at 5:02 p.m.
Last Modified: Friday, January 14, 2011 at 6:30 p.m.

When Jimi Hendrix played his "Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, little did his fans or detractors know he could become a symbol of our economic future.

In Richard Florida's opinion, he is. The researcher, economist, demographer and author of "The Creative Class" and most recently "The Great Reset" spoke energetically and

earnestly Friday at the BizTech Conference & Expo at the [Wilmington Convention Center](#).

Co-existing with Hendrix's breakthrough musicality was an understanding of modern music's technology. A creative genius, he experimented with all sorts of devices to out-blast his competition, Florida said, a hint of what success would look like now as we pass through “the greatest economic revolution in recent economic history.”

It's a “generational event” akin to the Industrial Revolution, Florida said, not a recession but a “reset” – an ongoing shift from an economy based on production to one based on knowledge.

Exploring how to shape Wilmington so that it attracts knowledge workers and participates fully in that shift is the crux of the Cape Fear Future initiative, sponsored by the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce.

Florida and others believe that attracting those workers is essential for Wilmington to emerge from trying times to join a concentrated geography of successful cities.

Achieving that takes a “business climate-plus,” he said, but it also takes a great people climate.

“It isn't a chicken and egg; they go together,” Florida said.

“You can attract a whole range of people – young families, empty-nesters, young graduates who are looking for a career and to meet other young people. All those go into building a business climate and a people climate,” he continued.

'Sun and fun'

“We all know that the economic environment has changed radically, and it used to be that the places that had a lot to offer in quality of life could attract people around real estate.

“But there has been a great resetting of our priorities. It doesn't mean that housing won't continue to provide jobs and support,” he said. But “regions that have prospered, that lured people to sun and fun have to change.”

Wilmington must build a sustainable economy that can generate jobs across the board, especially the high-wage, longer-term jobs, he said.

One of Wilmington's advantages, Florida said, is that it is part of “Charlanta” – an economic area also encompassing Atlanta, Charlotte and the Triangle.

“A smaller number of places that went into (the economic decline) will make it out,” Florida said. “Our economy not only spreads economic activity, it concentrates it.

“As we go through this, there will be successful communities, average communities and those that start to fall away.”

Wilmington's proximity to the Triangle will be an economic strength, he said – so much so that the Port City may have to work to retain what makes it special.

Elitist?

Some on the Left have criticized Florida's concept of the creative class as elitist, charging that his view abandons the blue-collar worker. But he countered:

“What is the one thing that each of us share? All of us have creativity,” Florida said. “And it's creativity which is the underlying fuel of our economy. The key question ... is how do we get the most out of it?”

“The companies and communities that will succeed out of this great reset are ones that understand the most how to harness this activity.”

‘Diversity and inclusion’

Vietnam-vet Hendrix was a man of the 1960s, a decade that arguably reset America's social direction. A similar acceptance of change and differences will help cities thrive as the nation's economic direction resets, according to Florida's research.

“Diversity and inclusion are at the center for me” of a chemistry added to high-tech that draws knowledge workers to a city, Florida said.

Florida's list of high-tech centers correlates closely with the places with the highest concentrations of gay people – Seattle, San Francisco, Austin, Boston and others.

Add in artistically and culturally creative people and “the associations were very strong,” he said.

Those kinds of cities also have drawn great numbers of immigrants, which he partially attributes to the perception of a meritocracy – if you can do the work you can succeed, regardless of who you are or where you come from.

For Wilmington and other successful cities, the formula is a combination, he said. “It's technology, openness and tolerance.”

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