

Creative Cities' ideas flourish

[by Vic Kolenc \ El Paso Times](#)

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El Paso's Creative Cities Leadership Project is long gone, but some ideas that were incubated in it live on.

The project, officially named the New Mexico Creative Cities Leadership Project, was started in August 2006 in conjunction with creative class guru Richard Florida.

He's the author of "The Rise of the Creative Class," first published in 2002, and other books on how creativity shapes cities and can drive economic development.

El Paso is still listed as one of eight creative cities communities on Florida's Creative Class Group website. The group provides consulting services on economic development, talent attraction and retention, and other creativity-related topics.

The project, made up of a diverse group of 31 El Pasoans, was "a think tank of a lot of good ideas," said Debbie Hamlyn, deputy city manager for community services, one of several city officials who helped oversee the project.

The aim was to keep the project going with a revolving door of members. But the project ended in early 2008 because there was no money or people to continue managing it, Hamlyn said.

Digital El Paso, which brought Wireless Internet to Downtown, and eventually wireless Internet to libraries and other city facilities, came out of the project, Hamlyn said. The city's public art program, and an ecotourism initiative now being pushed by County Judge Veronica Escobar, a Creative Cities project member, also came out of it, Hamlyn said.

The ecotourism idea, Escobar said, is to

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find ways to better market and develop El Paso's outdoor assets to bring people here for mountain hiking, biking and other outdoor activities.

An ecotourism website will soon be launched, Escobar said. A proposed paddling trail on a section of the Rio Grande is being worked on with the city, Escobar said.

"I wish we could have continued" the Creative Cities project, Escobar said.

A survey of the project's participants found that 72 percent of them wanted to see the program continue in some form.

City Rep. Susie Byrd, another project member, said what was needed was for a private group to take on the project to keep it going.

Byrd said the project helped her connect to people doing "incredible work" that she otherwise may not otherwise have met. She still calls on some of the project's former members to help with city initiatives, she said.

Byrd's group formed an El Paso Expatriates initiative, which surveyed young, talented El Pasoans who left the city to find out what was needed to get them back. That initiative is no longer in place, she said.

The Creative Cities project also led to the El Paso-Juárez Binational Arts Culture District design competition. Two Californians won the first competition and its \$7,500 prize in 2007 with their Rio Grande River Center design. Their idea was to create a parklike environment between the Santa Fe and Stanton Street international bridges. The competition died after 2007.

Another idea -- Border Canvas -- to get Christo and Jeanne-Claude, famous environmental artists, to do a public art project died when the artists rejected the idea.

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