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Daunting challenges require collaborative solutions

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Richard Florida, the author of the book “The Rise of the Creative Class,” has written an article in The Atlantic Online titled “How the Crash Will Reshape America” (March 2009). In this article, Florida describes the severe impact of our recent economic crash and proposes consequent broad changes in American cities and regions. Florida predicts that some areas of our nation will benefit from the recession while others will deteriorate. Unfortunately, the Rock River region has more attributes of a region that will suffer than prosper. If we truly accept this possibility, we must proactively address our challenges or face the possibility of ongoing high unemployment and high economic distress.

While the article is expansive in its speculations, the following points it makes are particularly relevant to the Greater Rockford region:

* Mega-regions, i.e., systems of cities and suburban rings like Boston–New York–Washington, Houston–San Antonio–Dallas, Greater Chicago, Greater Tokyo, and Greater London, are home to 18 percent of the world’s population, produce two-thirds of global economic output and nearly 9 in 10 new patented innovations.

* Cities like Seattle, Austin, Raleigh, and Boston now have two or three times the concentration of college graduates of Akron or Buffalo. Nobel laureate Robert Lucas defines this discrepancy in education attainment as “talent-clustering” and as a primary source of economic growth for these regions.

* Many local economies are in the midst of a fundamental, long-term transformation, shifting away from manufacturing and toward idea-driven creative industries that favor areas with high concentrations of college graduates.

* Older manufacturing regions and less affluent locations in our country will likely continue to struggle long after creative and “well-educated” cities put the recession behind them.

* Foreign competition, and especially replacing people with machines, is unlikely to stop.

Since 1950, the U.S. manufacturing sector has shrunk from 32 percent of nonfarm employment to just 10 percent, as recessions close plants that often never reopen.

Whew! How can our region respond to Florida's bleak assessment of future economic development for communities like Rockford?

First and foremost, we must accept the possibility that our current high unemployment and weakened level of economic inactivity will not improve as our nation moves out of recession, and that corrective action is necessary to sustain the Rock River region's quality of life.

Second, all organizations that contribute to our region's economic vitality and quality of life, including businesses, schools, churches, labor unions, service organizations, government and political leaders — both appointed and elected — must understand and accept their roles in addressing our regional challenges.

Third, we must understand the necessity of collaborative solutions to regional dilemmas instead of protecting the status quo.

Examples of protecting the status quo are abundant. It is evident when legislators lack the courage to confront alarming budget deficits; when constituent groups fight issues such as pension reform; when civil servants fight for their jobs and contractual conditions; and when citizens criticize the decisions of leaders without proposing plausible solutions.

However, what must be understood, and acknowledged, is that these actions will more likely than not lead to further deterioration of our community rather than prosperity.

Thus, we find the need for collaborative solutions, respecting the perspectives of all constituents, engaging stakeholders in meaningful discussion, and solving problems that could diminish the quality of life of our region if unaddressed.

We see examples of achieving collaboration in many urban communities. Nashville has focused on improving public education through a huge collaboration of business, industry, churches and schools. Pittsburgh has lost much of its manufacturing industry with the demise of the steel factories, while reinventing itself as a center of high-level technology.

Kalamazoo, Mich., has attracted new residents by offering high school graduates the promise of a free college education as its way of addressing the lack of acceptable levels of academic achievement and college readiness of their children. This program has been so successful it has inspired at least 19 similar programs across our nation.

What must be changed is our mindset. Whether we believe Florida's specific prediction or not, our situation could become desperate with the status quo. We are in a hard place that calls for hard decisions.

These decisions must come from leaders in all areas: politics, union, education, business, church, and civil or community service. Everyone has a stake in aligning to save our entire region, not just his or her own piece of it.

It is not easy to re-create a city, or to move a community from seemingly unsolvable problems to prosperity. Sacrifices are necessary. Parochial issues must be set aside.

Those with vested interests, both personal and regionally based, must be willing to accept the possibility of respectful, candid, honest and open collaboration.

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