

# THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

Richard Florida and Joel Kotkin agree: Pressure on the middle class in cities is growing



Richard Florida, researcher and author, will speak at the Kansas City Area Development Council's annual meeting Friday. CREATIVE CLASS GROUP File

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Kansas City, with its much improved downtown and still evolving suburbs, is a logical conversation starter on urban and suburban issues.

Luckily enough, two of the most prominent thinkers on those matters — Richard Florida and Joel Kotkin — will hold a discussion at the [Kansas City Area Development Council's](#) annual meeting on Friday, a private event.

As downtown Kansas City evolves into a neighborhood, a place where people young and old find new apartment buildings and nearby urban amenities appealing, its boosters advocate the benefits of a dense, walkable city with mass transit options to relieve dependency on cars.

Kansas City's vast suburbs would point to the quality of life that they offer: Affordable single-family housing, stable school districts, mild traffic congestion compared to other cities and an environment geared toward raising a family.

To Florida, a professor whose research interest is urban renewal, cities and suburbs have begun sharing a troubling commonality.

Florida in 2002 wrote "[The Rise of The Creative Class](#)." The book posited his theory that talented and innovative professionals tend to migrate to hip, inclusive and largely urban communities. Thus, cities can find new life and strengthen their economies if the amenities and culture of their urban enclaves reflect the values sought by the creative class.

Kansas City has pursued some of this advice. The streetcar, entertainment districts, initiatives to promote entrepreneurship and startup businesses stand out as a few examples. Residents have followed, and city leaders hope more jobs will, too.

These days, Florida is revisiting some of his theories, in part because the landscapes of urban and suburban communities now encounter a new dynamic: He said both have pockets of affluence adjacent to pockets of poverty with less space for the middle class in between them.

"What we have is areas of concentrated affluence where middle class neighborhoods like the one I grew up in in New Jersey...have declined," Florida said in an interview with The Star. "I think the definition of city and suburbs, which used to be so robust, is breaking down."

Florida seems to find more common ground in some ways with Kotkin, [an author on urban studies](#), who is more bullish on the future of the suburbs.

"You can have this economy that reflects this creative class ethic, but at the same time the class divides become more severe," Kotkin said in an interview with The Star. "The big point for me is the middle class family is becoming extinct."

Both men hold ideas that are applicable to Kansas City's economic development landscape.

Florida's observation about the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty rings true both in some of Kansas City's urban and suburban regions. In downtown, Kansas City has built a large supply of new housing, much of it market or luxury rate, to allow 21,000 residents to call downtown their home.

Some city leaders have concerns about where low-income residents can afford to live in the downtown core. Earlier this year, Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority chairman Michael Duffy sent a letter to Kansas City Mayor Sly James to broach the idea of requiring

apartment developers receiving tax abatements from the redevelopment authority to set aside a portion of available units for workforce housing.

Meanwhile, in the Shawnee Mission School District, which includes Mission Hills within its boundaries, 37 percent of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Florida's forthcoming book, "[The New Urban Crisis](#)," explores ways to solve the shortage of affordable housing in new urban communities, among other things.

Florida said he did not anticipate the speed with which urban areas repopulated, and the consequences, such as pricing out some of the creative class, that came with it.

"I think I completely underestimated the speed, pace and velocity of that back-to-the-city movement," Florida said.

Kotkin worries less about the downtown urban core areas that get revitalized than he does about the communities that surround them.

"The real problem is not the downtowns themselves; the downtowns have a lot of historic attributes that other areas have had — that's where the city hall is, that's where the concert hall is, entertainment districts," Kotkin said. "A lot of the neighborhoods around downtowns have done very poorly."

Both men agree that Kansas City is early enough along that it can avoid the traps that come with urbanization.

"I would say one of the things Kansas City has on its side is things are happening now and they can prepare for the future," Florida said.

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