



The Oregonian

Keeping Portland unique

An urban celebrity kicks off

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To the extent Portland has an economic development guru, it is Richard Florida. The charismatic author, Toronto academic and connoisseur of cities is best known for his research on the "creative class."

To hear Florida tell it, Freud was not necessarily wrong, but he was incomplete. It isn't just love and work that make people happy, but also something Florida calls "quality of place." And Portland, luckily, is loaded with this Q of P factor.

On Wednesday, thus, fittingly, Florida came to town to help launch Greenlight Greater Portland, a new regional economic development initiative. Impressively, about 500 people turned out to hear him, and learn about Greenlight. The organization is working to foster a new marketing strategy for seven counties and 30 cities in the Portland-Vancouver region.

This collaboration is so long overdue that many people are startled to learn that it is new. In a region that prides itself on partnerships, it's pretty obvious that any splintering of economic development is counterproductive. The fragmentation that has held Portland back has worked to the advantage of other regions. Thus, what Greenlight representatives keep hearing now from rival regions, perhaps somewhat nervous about it, is: "If you guys could just get your act together, you'd be unstoppable."

A new analysis of 10 regions, which Greenlight released Wednesday, helps to explain why Portland is potentially such a formidable competitor. And don't be quick to blow off the fun stuff either, like the fact that Portland has more bookstores, wineries and brewpubs per capita than the other cities Greenlight analyzed. These things boost the area's uniqueness, which makes it a magnet for college graduates.

Florida's view about quality of place and its contribution to happiness may sound semi-mystical, but it's not drawn from thin air. His research shows place matters. And what people value in a place are the basics (safety, good streets, good schools); a job market flexible enough to provide not just a first job, but also a second or third; a chance for social and civic engagement; diversity and openness; and distinct, authentic personality. People in a position to choose where they move increasingly shun the generic.

If every guru has a mantra, the one that Florida repeated and left his audience with on Wednesday wasn't the least bit esoteric. It was a warning so basic it was almost crude.

The economic development trends now converging are very much in Portland's favor. But there are perils ahead.

Said Florida:

"Don't screw this up."

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