

Closing the wage gap key to community, urbanist says

Anna Dimoff / North Shore News

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Internationally recognized urbanist Richard Florida addresses an audience at West Vancouver's Kay Meek Theatre Sept. 8. photo supplied British Pacific Properties

Creating a livable community and closing the gap between the “elite creative class” and the “sinking service class” were key themes presented by internationally recognized urbanist Richard Florida, who spoke at Kay Meek Theatre Sept. 8.

Florida’s presentation wrapped up a speaker series that brought three distinguished urbanists to West Vancouver as part of the Cypress Village planning process. The event was sponsored by British Pacific Properties and Hollyburn Family Services Society.

Florida is the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Business and has authored eight books, with his latest work, *The New Urban Crisis*, coming out in 2017.

The speaker series is part of a BPP-led public engagement process with the goal of developing three to four conceptual plan options for the mixed-use development above the Upper Levels Highway. The project is aimed at attracting residents aged 20 to 49.

Florida’s theories on how to cultivate more livable communities that attract young, creative thinkers explore the demand for innovation in today’s urban economy.

He paralleled these ideal communities to factories at the height of industrialization. Those factories brought about innovation by focussing the attention of employees on the common goal of improvement.

“That creativity doesn’t come from individual geniuses; that’s something that we do together,” said Florida. “It’s a social process, it’s a process of us being together and linking together and forming communities that optimize and create that creative impetus,” he said.

Florida noted the shrinking percentage of laborers in the working class, saying that for the first time in human history, our economy is not vitally linked to strength, labour, and processing natural resources. The rise of the service industry that now employs about 40 per cent of Vancouver’s work force, according to Florida, is the large population pocket that needs to be supported most.

“We forget that we made factory jobs good jobs. We decided as a society that we would create a middle class, the factory workers, by paying them more. We could do the same thing for service workers,” said Florida.

His philosophy is to embrace the creativity of each individual and catalyze innovation, but to do that, he said, companies need to support employees financially and incentivize creative thinkers to contribute. That’s a challenging task, said Florida, when many employed in the service industry report spending up to 70 per cent of their income on housing in Vancouver.

“How do we develop a good job strategy that can make those service jobs better jobs? How do we tap the creative impetus into the people who work at our food shops, in our restaurants?” he asked the audience.

Florida said that removing the commute is a large part in creating successful, concentrated communities. “This attempt to overcome the divide between where we live, where we work, where we interact, is really important,” he said. “The more we can create more organized, concentrated, clustered communities where people can live and work, the more we have places for them to congregate ... the better off we’ll be.”

BPP and the working group will continue to collect public input on the future of the Cypress Village Area Development Plan and hope to have the project adopted by council by 2018. Visit cypressvillage.com for project details.

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