

THE WINDSOR STAR

Opinion

Schmidt City: Get up off your asses!



Urbanist Richard Florida tells seated Windsor crowd about the dangers of too much sitting.
(Doug Schmidt/The Windsor Star)



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Get up off your asses, renowned urban studies expert Richard Florida told hundreds of politicians, planners and environmental types from across Canada who were gathered Thursday in Windsor at this year's Sustainable Communities national conference hosted by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

Florida, who is heavy in demand among the city-loving classes, said there's a miracle drug to help with the coming crisis of car-clinging baby boomers reaching sedentary old age while being pushed aside by a new generation of sugar-fueled youths who spend their lives sitting in front of computer screens.

"It's called walking," said Florida.

Despite warning that too much sitting is, in fact, "toxic," the author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* had his Windsor audience on the edge of their seats during his presentation. He said the communities best suited to emerge from the current economic stagnation will be the ones most successful at attracting this job-producing group, which Florida said doesn't just include artists but anyone who is creative and entrepreneurial.

While governments try triggering growth through stimulus spending and/or tax cutting, Florida said what's going to get us out of the current economic "crisis" are cities "restructuring the way we live and work." He called it a "geographic fix," in which the highly mobile creative types are drawn to the urban areas they love by the types of amenities offered, by public and park gathering spaces and by a community's walkability.

"We're seeing a back-to-the-city movement," he said, explaining that creative people are drawn to urban environments with denser development considered more energy efficient and less wasteful. Of note, Florida's appearance as a keynote speaker at the Windsor conference left the tiniest of ecological footprints — Florida was actually in Florida, and his live performance was beamed to the large audience via three giant screens in the cavernous meeting hall.

Florida described the Three-Ts needed for a thriving and economically sustainable community — technology (because the creative class is heavy on information and knowledge gathering and dissemination), talent (both in attracting and generating) and tolerance (how inclusive, open-minded and diverse the community is).

He described Canada as one of the most diverse countries in the world — a huge competitive advantage — with one of the highest ratios of workers within the creative class. He said about five million workers — or 41 per cent of the Canadian workforce — are part of this "new class that powers economic growth." But he said all people are creative and the key is to "creative-fy all of the work."

Technology and globalization is killing the concept of distance, which is increasing the importance of individual cities as the real drivers of economic growth, and with the importance of national, state or provincial borders becoming less and less relevant. That's why Florida believes cities and urban regions need to be given more power (a suggestion that got him a good round of applause at Caesars).

With more and more well-paid manufacturing jobs disappearing, and an increasing reliance on the knowledge sector and creative class to grow the economy, Florida warned of a dangerous divide growing between the new haves and new have-nots. What's required, he said, is a new

social contract that provides fairness for those in the latter category, for example, the service and hospitality sectors.

Florida is the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. He is also a global research professor at New York University and senior editor of The Atlantic.

While Florida has his detractors, Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis is among the converts and says he's read the urbanist's best-selling books.

"Everything we're doing is consistent with what Richard is preaching," Francis said of his city's effort to emerge from one of its worst recessions ever by becoming one of "the most affordable and attractive" communities to live.

"We're starting to turn the corner," he said, citing such recent investments as assisting the Art Gallery of Windsor from going under, helping the Windsor Symphony Orchestra find a permanent home and building an aquatic centre to help foster "a healthy, active community for all ages."

Windsor will continue to expand the amenities needed to lure or grow a creative class, "but we're doing it in a balanced way," he said.

"We had an economic crisis, and it forced us to rethink who we are," said Francis.

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