

Toronto is a 'city state' and needs to start acting like it: Richard Florida

By **DONOVAN VINCENT** Housing Reporter

Wed., Nov. 7, 2018



Toronto is a city on “the brink” of not fully realizing its potential and must think about a new model for growth if it wants to thrive and stand out as an example of a modern global metropolis, says urban studies expert Richard Florida.

Speaking Wednesday at Urban Land Institute Toronto’s symposium on Toronto urbanism, Florida, one of the world’s leading urban thinkers and a professor at the University of Toronto’s school of cities and Rotman School of Management, said Toronto is an incredible city but one that faces significant challenges including housing affordability, a “worsening class divide” and woeful traffic congestion.

“We are a powerful global city with lots of assets to build on,” says Richard Florida, who spoke Wednesday at the Urban Land Institute Toronto’s symposium on Toronto urbanism. (Lorne Bridgman)

He went on to say the toughest issue the municipality is grappling with is the sheer size the city and the Greater Toronto region — and the area needs to see itself as united in order to tackle these challenges.

“Once you pass the mark of 5 or 6 million people as a metropolitan region, up to that point you can grow by (urban) sprawl, but somewhere you hit a wall and you can no longer grow or scale in the same traditional way,” he told the audience at Evergreen Brick Works, which included urban planners, architects and builders.

He referred to Greater New York, which has a population of almost 25 million and made significant investments many decades ago, including on subways and rail connections.

“We’re going to have to make similar decisions now, and those decisions will make or break us,” he said.

He said in Toronto, which has a population that is half visible minority or foreign-born, there is a multicultural mosaic that seems to work better than our neighbours south of the border. He said that’s in large part because we are inoculated by a social safety net, “health care that works, public education that works” and a city that compared to others around the world is “relatively safe.”

He also noted that in terms of total economic output, the GTA — he included the Golden Horseshoe — is responsible for about “\$700 billion” (U.S) in economic output.

“Which means our ... region is equivalent to that of Sweden. So we are a city state, a mega region.”

He later added: “we are a powerful global city with lots of assets to build on,” he said.

But he went on to say that despite all of these successes there’s a “sense that something is amiss, something is wrong.”

He said one of those things is the high cost of housing, adding that Toronto is among the most unaffordable cities in the world.

He pointed out that 40 per cent of Torontonians are part of what he calls the “creative class” making \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year, and 50 per cent of residents fall into the low-wage service class, making \$30,000 a year.

After paying for housing, the former group has about \$50,000 a year left to live on, while the latter only has about \$11,000.

“No wonder we have a political divide ... our city is divided socio-economically,” he said.

“It’s interesting. Our city is not as divided along ethnic lines or along lines of nationality, but it is divided by socioeconomic class, giving us our own kind of spin on poverty,” he told the audience.

As for traffic congestion, he said when he has to travel to Pearson airport he has “no idea” whether he can get there on time, not just during rush hour but on weekend afternoons too.

He said to solve these challenges city builders and leaders need to adopt an “inclusive narrative and argument” that translates across race, ethnic, class and geographic lines.

“We have to develop a narrative that says the city and suburbs are part of a whole.”

Donovan Vincent is a housing reporter based in Toronto. Follow him on Twitter:

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