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Region needs to prepare for crisis of success, says urban expert Florida



Richard Florida

Courtesy of Creative Class Group

Urban thinker Richard Florida says successful technology centres tend to leave behind people who are not part of the creative class.

Waterloo Region Record

By [Terry Pender](#)

KITCHENER — Waterloo Region needs to start planning now for the negative impacts of an urban renaissance driven by an expanding technology sector, says renowned urban thinker and writer Richard Florida.

The negatives include unaffordable housing, increased congestion and a nasty backlash from segments of the population that feel left out of a revitalized, urban-centred lifestyle, Florida said earlier this week at Canada Technology Triangle's annual international reception and dinner.

"We have to plan now," he said. "You do not want to find yourself in that situation."

Former Toronto mayor Rob Ford was elected as a result of that backlash, and it also explains the support for Donald Trump in the Republic Party primaries in the United States, Florida said.

The creative economy is dividing cities, he said. While the creative class prospers and thrives, about half the population is falling farther and farther behind. This has created a new urban crisis, said Florida, who will explore the subject in his next book.

"In San Francisco, oh my God, it is not only congested, nobody can afford to buy a house," Florida said. "That's one of the things we are finding in knowledge hubs and tech communities like this one, and it happens so fast."

It is a crisis of success because too many people want to live in the resurgent urban cores of technology hubs and they are bidding up the price of housing, he said.

Florida skyrocketed to international fame in 2002 with the publication of "The Rise of the Creative Class." He has since published four more books and has another one scheduled for release in early 2016.

Florida is the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, a global research professor at New York University, and the founder of the Creative Class Group, which works closely with governments and companies worldwide.

In university, he studied the world's most efficient factories and how to revitalize post-industrial cities. His research was a marriage of urban ethnography and data analysis.

What he discovered in revitalized cities was an economy dominated by creative workers who could choose where they wanted to live and work. The work follows the creative class, not the other way around. Successful 21st century economies have technology, talent and tolerance, and handy access to an international airport, he found.

"Innovation takes place in great cities, great communities and great metropolises," he said in his speech.

Florida suggested that Waterloo Region has much to gain by forging closer links to Toronto. "You have the talent factory and Toronto has the lifestyle and scale," he said. "We cannot compete alone."

"If we are going to become more innovative as a nation, if we are going to become more productive, if we are going to become more competitive, we are not going to do that just on the backs of great firms, we have to have great cities that mobilize those assets, that create density,

that allow us to generate the startups, and that's why we need to grow together as a mega region," Florida said.

Florida urged officials in Waterloo Region to address two key issues, and to do so quickly.

The first is to ensure that the cities in the region have thriving arts and culture; interesting and diverse neighbourhoods where old buildings are preserved and reused; and vastly improved train service that binds it all together. The second is to prepare now for ways to reduce the negative impacts of economic success.

As little as 10 years ago Florida said he would not have predicted that young people would be priced out of the housing markets in Toronto, Boston, Austin, Seattle and many other cities.

Congestion is already here, particularly along Highway 401, and housing prices are beyond the means of many, especially in the Greater Toronto Area. As the technology sector here tries to build a super cluster linking Waterloo Region and Toronto, governments must build better transit within cities, and high-speed rail links between the cities, Florida said.

Florida noted that it took him more than three hours to drive from his office at the University of Toronto to Bingemans, where he gave the keynote speech at the last international reception and dinner hosted Canada's Technology Triangle. The organization is being supplanted by the Waterloo Region Economic Development Corp.

Florida's call for high-speed rail was greeted with applause.

In an interview before his speech, he supported Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne's call for high-speed rail in southern Ontario. He believes high-speed rail should run from Windsor to Toronto, and then split into two branches, one going to Ottawa and the other to Montreal.

"In this country we need a commitment to a new kind of rail transport and the time to do it is now," Florida said in his speech.

"Now the only way we are going to do it is by stopping to build roads, which don't fix the problem, and by building a new kind of transit and transport that can enable us to get to places quickly," he said.

In Florida's last book, "The Great Reset," he said high-speed rail corridors linking the cities of economic mega regions will be the defining transportation technology of the 21st century, just as the automobile was in the last century.

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