

Mitchell Schnurman: Place matters most, especially to young professionals



By MITCHELL SCHNURMAN

The chamber of commerce is usually charged with promoting the city, not exploring its weaknesses, especially in public. So it's surprising — and encouraging at the same time — that the Fort Worth Chamber picked Richard Florida as keynote speaker for its annual meeting Tuesday.

An author and academic, Florida has become known for connecting rising real estate prices to the concentration of gays and artists in a community.

Cities that are more tolerant and diverse, he says, attract more gays and artists, and that's usually a sign of a larger "creative class" — Florida's term for a giant group that includes doctors, educators, engineers, writers and entertainers, and accounts for about 30 percent of the work force.

A larger creative class translates into more startups, more patents and a stronger regional economy, he says.

In his latest book, *Who's Your City?*, Florida recounts how satirist Stephen Colbert once introduced him: "A disturbing new study has found a solution to the housing slump," Colbert said. "Live next to gay people."

The one-liner obscures Florida's larger point, which is that place matters most, especially to young professionals. These workers are often drawn to communities that are dynamic and open to all kinds of people, rather than to specific jobs or companies.

This is a different, less-flattering prism for looking at Fort Worth and North Texas. When it comes to the economy, our leaders usually tout job growth and the low cost of living, great advantages that often place us among the top areas in the country. But those factors aren't the top beacons to creative types, who may put as much value on scenery, sense of place and walkable neighborhoods.

The region ranks fairly high in some of Florida's metrics. For families with children, Dallas-Fort Worth ranks 12th among 300 metro areas as a "best buy."

It's No. 56 as a best buy for gay professionals. It scores 50 percent higher than the national average in attracting and retaining talented 18- to 34-year-olds.

The larger mega-region, which includes Austin, San Antonio and Houston, is one of 40 powerhouses in the world. Florida says these 40 have 18 percent of the world's population, yet generate two-thirds of global economic output and nearly 9 in 10 new patented innovations.

It's good to be included in that group, but North Texas doesn't have any of Florida's best cities for any category. Boston, San Francisco and New York dominate the U.S. list, so maybe Florida's visit will spark a conversation about how to improve Fort Worth's prospects.

In surveys, the chamber found that a share of young professionals — the creative class that Florida sees as key to regional prosperity — have some issues with the city. They say it's harder to break into the establishment, particularly if they don't have children and they're not from here. Many frequently go to Dallas to party or work.

"Our fear is that we're losing these young, creative people," said Marilyn Gilbert, the chamber's marketing chief. "They tend to pick a place to live first, and then look for a job. We want to be a place where they choose to come."

Dallas has several funky neighborhoods largely populated with young creative types. Austin, with a vibe all its own, puts out the welcome sign for just about anyone. Fort Worth gets recognized for its quality of life, especially its walkable downtown, but it doesn't make a big impression on the funk-o-meter.

The city has potential, though. Vacant warehouses near downtown are ripe for low-cost startups, and the Texas location ensures that many newcomers will at least take a look.

"In college, when we talked about where to live next, Austin was always No. 1," said Andrew Blake, a 34-year-old real estate executive, recalling his days as a graduate business student at the University of Texas at Austin. "But Fort Worth was next for a lot of people. They saw Houston and Dallas as soulless, but they were open to Fort Worth."

Blake is part of a chamber group for young professionals that was created a few years ago. While Florida emphasizes regionalism, Blake says the city will resonate with more young people by distinguishing itself from Dallas and developing a separate identity.

"It's a matter of scale and time," Blake said.

The Trinity River Vision could accelerate that. It will eventually open hundreds of acres to new development near downtown, which should lure a diverse crowd. And it offers an alternate strategy for economic development. By emphasizing infrastructure and building around the river, it brings a new aesthetic to downtown.

Much of the economic development in Fort Worth funnels tax breaks to big employers, with the chamber touting the spinoff effects.

Those were significant with Sundance West and Alliance, two crucial pieces in Fort Worth's revival.

But Florida says that bigger payoffs generally come from building a place that attracts creative workers and clusters talent. That's not easy to replicate, he wrote in a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, but it starts with "the ever-more-intensive use of space."

Pack in more people, more affordably, he says, and improve their quality of life.

"That means liberal zoning and building codes," Florida wrote, "more mixed-use development in suburbs and cities alike, the in-filling of suburban cores near rail links, new investment in rail, and congestion pricing for travel on our roads.

"Not everyone wants to live in city centers, and the suburbs are not about to disappear," Florida wrote. "But we can do a much better job of connecting suburbs to cities and to each other, and allowing regions to grow bigger and denser without losing their velocity."

Leaders in North Texas have already embraced commuter rail, and Fort Worth has a streetcar plan for downtown. Maybe Florida can suggest a way to sell the ideas.

Last week, a proposal to fund commuter rail died in the Legislature, despite being the region's top priority. It lacked grassroots support, and without pressure from the public, enough lawmakers wouldn't get behind a bill that might raise taxes.

But even in a recession, some things are worth paying for. Making North Texas a better place to live — for commuters, artists, gays, everybody — is one of them.

Mitchell Schnurman's column appears Sundays and Wednesdays. 817-390-7821