

Detroit Homecoming: Panelists envision the city as a living laboratory for 21st-century urban life

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Detroit



Kresge Detroit Program Managing Director Wendy Lewis Jackson (left) and urbanist Richard Florida discuss the future of innovation in Detroit on a panel at this year's Detroit Homecoming event.

At this year's [Crain's Detroit Homecoming](#), urbanist Richard Florida and Kresge Detroit Program Managing Director Wendy Lewis Jackson shared a fast-moving conversation about where Detroit is headed and why its future hinges on neighborhood strength and regional collaboration.

The session, “Urban Insights: Detroit’s Progress and Potential,” at the annual expat immersion event sponsored by Crain’s Detroit Business opened with what Florida has used to describe the city’s resilience, calling Detroit “the city that built the world twice.” He connected that history to the present, arguing that Detroit is poised to serve as a proving ground for the next economy by blending its manufacturing DNA with research, technology and design. He also outlined his ongoing work to map Detroit’s role on a “New Economic Map,” making the case for a Detroit-Ann Arbor innovation corridor that links research universities, startup activity and advanced industry to inclusive, place-based growth.

Jackson grounded the discussion in Kresge’s commitments on the ground and in neighborhoods. She pointed to the foundation’s decision to relocate its headquarters to the Marygrove Conservancy Campus and emphasized that move with the even more paramount resident-focused neighborhood investment taking shape in Northwest Detroit.

Florida and Jackson also highlighted how corridor-scale collaboration can amplify neighborhood impact. Examples include education and public-realm work anchored at Marygrove, with the campus and nearby commercial corridors envisioned as welcoming public amenities that connect residents, institutions and visitors.

In a 2025 report, [*Competing at Scale: The Case For A Detroit-Ann Arbor Innovation Corridor*](#), Florida argues that Detroiters stand to gain in concrete ways from a Detroit-Ann Arbor Innovation Corridor. Knitting together Detroit’s manufacturing strengths with Ann Arbor’s research engine would create the scale that attracts companies, fuels new start-ups and keeps existing firms growing, which means more jobs for residents and population growth. Just as important, the corridor model is designed to upgrade the region’s signature industries with new technologies such as artificial intelligence, software, robotics and clean energy so opportunity reaches a broader share of the workforce. According to the report, the region already invests more than \$20 billion a year in corporate research and development, much of it concentrated in the corridor.

Looking ahead, the speakers sketched a Detroit that functions as a living laboratory for 21st-century urban life — from mobility and digital manufacturing to smarter, greener public spaces — provided that innovation remains tethered to community priorities.

Florida also emphasizes residents would see everyday benefits as the corridor matures. A thicker labor market between Detroit and Ann Arbor gives local graduates and midcareer workers more ways to advance without leaving the state, while neighborhood pilots in advanced mobility and urban tech can improve safety, shorten commutes and lower energy costs by using real sites as living test beds. A proposed Innovation Alliance would help the region compete for federal place-based funds and make faster rail or transit links a priority, shrinking the time it takes to get to work, school and opportunity.

“The conversation underscored what we believe,” Jackson said in closing. “Detroit’s neighborhoods and the people who live and work in them drive this city. Our job is to invest alongside residents so families can thrive.”

