

Do we need Bohemians for development?

DAVID CAMPBELL

Economically driven

Published Wednesday March 19th, 2008

Appeared on page B1

If you don't know the name Richard Florida, you should by now. Florida developed the Creative Cities Index in the 1990s for the metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada. His theory is that metropolitan areas with high concentrations of high-tech workers, artists, musicians, gay men and 'bohemians', correlate with a higher level of economic development. He is now the equivalent of a pop star in the economic development business with just about every city I know looking to be more 'creative'.

As is typical of such studies, only Saint John was in the list of North American communities reviewed by Florida (and his Canadian counterparts). However, I recently ran essentially his model for all three of New Brunswick's largest urban areas to see how we compare on the Creative Cities Index. The results were interesting:

Bohemian Index: The Bohemian Index looks at the number of people employed in creative occupations such as performing artists, designers, artisans and craftspeople. Fredericton has a slightly higher number of persons per 1,000 employed in these categories than Moncton or Saint John, but is still well below the national average. Urban areas such as Vancouver and Toronto have more than twice as many people employed in these occupations (adjusting for population size).

Talent Index: On the Talent Index (the percentage of adult population with a university degree) Fredericton ranks very high when compared to other Canadian cities. Greater Moncton and Greater Saint John are well below the national average. However, using university degree holders only as a proxy for 'talent' has some flaws. For example, Greater Moncton and Saint John have higher numbers of community college and trade school graduates - many of these are in new economy disciplines such as graphic design and computer programming. If these educational attainment metrics are included, the overall results would be different.

Mosaic Index: Florida's Mosaic Index is based simply on the percentage of the population that is foreign-born or first-generation immigrants. All three New Brunswick urban areas have among the lowest immigrant populations of Canadian cities.

Tech Pole Index: The Tech Pole Index compares a region's share of national employment in technology-intensive manufacturing and service industries to the region's overall share of national employment. Again, New Brunswick's urban areas were below average for this index.

Therefore, using Florida's Creative Cities Index, New Brunswick's urban areas are not very creative and, if you buy into his theory, are at an economic development disadvantage when compared to other Canadian and American cities.

Florida extends this theory into the public policy arena and advocates that cities must invest a lot more into being creative. Specifically, he advocates significant public investments for creative endeavours (such as the arts, music, etc.) and that will attract creative people making the community more vibrant and lead to more successful economic development.

In general, I am suspect of Florida's theory. It's not that I don't see the link between creative industries and economic development. But how that theory gets applied within public policy is more of a grey area.

Florida believes that large-scale public investments in creative industries will foster a culture of creativity and innovation and lead to better economic development. But maybe, just maybe, it is the other way around. Maybe urban areas such as Silicon Valley, Austin, Texas, Toronto and Vancouver have strong economies that over time generate surplus wealth which is channelled into private (and public) sector investments for arts and culture.

Those investments increase the level of bohemians in the community and support better economic development outcomes.

Do we need bohemians? Essentially, I think this can be framed using the classic chicken-and-egg problem. Which comes first? Do we invest massive public funds in the arts to attract bohemians which will make our communities more creative and lead to more high-tech companies locating here? Or do we attract high-tech companies here, foster more wealth creation and then see the development of a strong arts and cultural community that will support better economic development outcomes?

Of course, the right answer is both. But in a time of scarce resources, I still believe New Brunswick's provincial and local governments need to be highly focused on targeted economic development efforts. I believe we need to spend a realistic amount of public funds in the arts and culture area but, ultimately, we need far more focus on attracting high-tech industries and fostering successful entrepreneurship.

As a side note, Richard Florida was wooed last year to head the University of Toronto's new \$120-million Centre for Jurisdictional Advantage and Prosperity, housed in the MaRS Discovery District in Toronto. He also has new book out entitled *How the Creative Economy is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of your Life*. Even though I am somewhat skeptical of his approach, I think his theories are one of the most important trends in economic development. All economic developers and municipal leaders should read and understand Florida's work.

David Campbell is an economic development consultant based in Moncton. He writes a daily blog, *It's the Economy Stupid*, at www.davidwcampbell.com. His column appears Wednesdays.

Log in to access premium content and features on this site.

 Log In

Register For a **ONE Account** - FREE!

Want online access to Atlantic Canada's premiere source for local news, entertainment, sports and much more? [Click here](#) to register online **FREE**.