Richard Florida offers a radical interpretation of economic development in the early 21st century. He advances the thesis that the so-called “creative class” – artists, educators, scientists, engineers and professionals who solve complex problems – are the driving force behind innovation, entrepreneurial activity and economic growth. To prosper in the years ahead, Florida contends, metropolitan regions must focus on creating the conditions favorable to attracting and retaining members of this class.

Many of Florida’s ideas are common parlance in leading creative centers around the U.S., from the San Francisco/Silicon Valley region to Austin and the Research Triangle, but they are largely absent from the discourse on economic development in Virginia – especially downstate Virginia. If Florida is correct, then the Commonwealth faces a dicey future. Most regions in the Old Dominion are pursuing hopelessly antiquated strategies such as industrial recruitment and the development of convention centers, sports stadiums and other high-profile real-estate projects. Even Northern Virginia, which is considerably more advanced in its thinking than the Rest of Virginia, may have peaked. Increasingly, the creative class prefers to live and work in vibrant urban areas rather than in high-tech, suburban “nerdistans.”
Florida’s epiphany came in the mid-1990s when Lycos, owner of a powerful search-engine technology coming out of Carnegie Mellon University, decamped from Pittsburgh to Boston. Florida, a professor of economic development at Carnegie Mellon, was intrigued. Pittsburgh seemingly had everything it took to survive in the Creative Age: a strong corporate base, world-class research universities and a high quality of life. Yet the economy putters along “in a middling, flat-line pattern.”[1] As he dug for an explanation, he found that many educated young people were moving to more diverse, more exciting locales. And in a switch from the conventional wisdom, he realized that corporations were following the workers – not the other way around.

According to Florida, the global economy is moving into a new economic age, the “Creative Age,” which is scrambling all the conventional rules for economic and community development. Competitive advantage comes increasingly from the ability to innovate -- the capacity to develop new technologies and business models. No longer is it sufficient to build an industrial-era infrastructure of roads, airports, water lines and power grids. To spur innovation and entrepreneurial activity, Florida argues, a region must assemble the infrastructure of innovation, including R&D facilities, venture capital and, most importantly, the kinds of amenities – from biking trails to a lively music scene – that attract creative people.

Florida defines the Creative Class as those occupational categories encompassing “science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content.” [2] In addition to this super-creative core, he counts creative professionals in business and finance, law, health care and related fields. All told, by his reckoning, the creative class numbers roughly 38 million Americans, or roughly 30 percent of the work force. Among cities with more than 1 million people, the proportion of creative workers varies regionally from a high of 38.4 percent of the work force in metro Washington, D.C., to a low of 18.5 percent in Las Vegas. [3]

Not surprisingly, regions with large numbers of scientists, engineers and other creative professionals tend to rank among
the most innovative places in the country, create more new businesses and be associated with technology companies. They also tend to have the strongest economies.

That’s hardly surprising. Of greater interest, Florida argues that the Creative Class brings a new set of values to their careers and personal lives. Contrary to the dot.com hype over bonuses and stock options, creative workers are less entranced by such benefits than by jobs that offer personal challenge and growth. What a creative worker wants most, Florida says, is “to exercise his creativity in building something, to experience the whole cycle of having ideas, putting them into action and seeing the rewards.”[4]

In a related trend, the massive corporate restructuring and downsizing of the 1980s destroyed the compact between corporation and employee. No longer expecting or wanting lifetime employment, members of the Creative Class change jobs frequently. As hyper-mobility spreads through the economy, creative workers act like free agents, moving laterally from company to company, seeking more rewarding challenges and taking more control over their careers.

Creative workers also require more flexible schedules. In households with two working parents, employees need more leeway to run errands or cope with children. Meanwhile, the nature of work itself is changing. Notes Florida: “Much creative work is project work and projects tend to run in cycles, with periods of crunch time followed by slower periods.”[5] Increasingly, creative employees are seeking – and getting -- idiosyncratic deals such as “sculpted” job descriptions tailored to the individual.

People in creative occupations also tend to work more than members of the working class or service class. The longer hours combined with the blurring of work and personal time create a perceived shortage of time. People cope through a complex interweaving of their work and personal lives, Florida writes. “From morning to night and from workplace to home, they intersperse bursts of work with chunks of personal time for
exercise, errands, socializing, family time or just plain
downtime.”[6]

The “time famine” engenders new life strategies. “If one cannot
elongate time, perhaps one can deepen or intensify it,” Florida
observes. Members of the Creative Class pursue activities that
provide more intense experiences. Increasingly, they seek to
pack their lives full of high-quality, multi-dimensional activity.
They prefer biking or rock climbing to passively watching sports
on television. They enjoy up-close, street-level culture – cafes,
sidewalk musicians, galleries and bistros – to the formal settings
of museums and opera halls. Above all, they crave “authentic”
ambience as opposed to the ersatz sensations of the shopping
mall or a Disney World.

This sea change in values has become a driving force in the
geography of economic development. Successful regions don’t
achieve superior economic results by investing in traditional
infrastructure like freeways, sports stadiums, suburban malls and
theme park-like entertainment districts. Successful regions don’t
outperform their peers by undermining their tax bases with
incentives to lure foot-loose corporate investment. They excel by
providing what creative workers are looking for: “abundant, high-
quality amenities, an openness to diversity of all kinds, and
above all else the opportunity to validate their identities as
creative people.”[7]

Rather than losing significance in the New Economy, Florida
contends, geography is becoming more important. Under the
rules of the Creative Economy, larger metro areas enjoy a big
advantage. People pick a region not to take a single job but to
pursue a career. They expect to change jobs frequently, so they
look for job markets conducive to a horizontal career path in
their field. In other words, says Florida, people look for a “thick”
labor market.

But lifestyle can trump labor markets, as demonstrated by the
high rankings of a number of smaller cities with universities.
Creative people seek communities that offer an experience
compatible with their priorities and values. Where people once
were willing to travel great distances to enjoy weeklong
vacations at the beach or in the mountains, the time famine
drives them to seek recreational amenities close at hand. When
they want to take a quick break to recharge their batteries, “a
beach house or country getaway spot doesn’t do them much
good,” Florida says. “They require trails or parks close at
hand.”[8] Likewise, creative people want a vibrant nightlife they
can partake in spontaneously when time permits -- cafes, coffee
shops and small jazz clubs – not operas, symphonies or ballets
bound by strict schedules.

Creative-minded people also want to live in communities that are
tolerant, culturally diverse and open to newcomers. They crave
excitement, energy and the interchange of ideas and
perspectives. They relish encountering people unlike themselves
to trade views and spar over issues. They savor fine architecture
and beautiful natural views. In particular, I would add to Florida’s
list, creative people appreciate the availability of well designed
public places, from parks to plazas, which facilitate human
interaction and serendipitous encounters.

Some places possess these attributes; others don’t. As a result,
Florida says, the 1990s experienced a wholesale resorting of
people among cities and regions nationwide. Regions are
polarizing between those that are predominantly creative and
economically successful, and those that are comprised mainly of
Working Class or Service Class people. Those regions that are
bypassed by the Creative Class face dim prospects.

Ironically, Florida argues, communities characterized by strong
social cohesion are often unattractive to the Creative Class. The
old social structures have their advantages: They engender
lasting relationships, mutual respect, trust, civic-mindedness and
social stability. Commentators often wax sentimental about those
virtues, but social cohesion also can inhibit creativity. Innovation
is built upon the interchange of ideas. The interchange of ideas is
abetted by the intermingling of diverse people with weak social
ties, not strong ones. By definition, strong relationships consume
more time and effort to maintain. People with weak ties can
manage larger social networks, allowing more interchange. Says
Florida: “Weak ties are critical to the creative environment of a
city of region because they allow for the rapid entry of new people and rapid absorption of new ideas.”[9]

The bottom line, Florida concludes, is that economic developers must pay more attention to the people climate than the business climate. “Instead of subsidizing companies, stadiums and retail centers, communities need to be open to diversity and invest in the kinds of lifestyle options and amenities that people really want.”[10] Invest in universities, which are magnets for creative people. Support R&D. Build recreational amenities. Create cultural districts. Maintain public spaces where people can interact. Develop pedestrian-friendly town centers filled with a diverse mix of coffee shops, cafes, designer artist studios and renovated office lofts. Finally, don’t recruit businesses -- recruit artists and other culturally creative people.

Virginia is blessed with many assets valued by creative people. But we’ve acquired them more by happenstance than by design, and our political and civic leaders are not systematically cultivating them. Still, it’s never too late to begin. A good first step would be to put a copy of The Rise of the Creative Class into the hands of every elected official, civic leader and economic development professional across the state.

-- July 22, 2002

[2] Creative Class, p. 8
[5] Creative Class, p. 121
[7] Creative Class, p. 219
[8] Creative Class, p. 224
[9] Creative Class, p. 277
[10] Creative Class, p. 283