

Coming to grips with Boulder's existential opportunity

By **John Tayer** — May 5, 2017

Existential: Adjective “relating to existence.”

There has been a buzz in the past few weeks regarding a new book by the urban-studies theorist Richard Florida, the “New Urban Crisis.” Remember, Mr. Florida? He’s the one who extolled places such as Boston and Austin as the hope for America’s economy. In his previous seminal work, “The Rise of the Creative Class,” Florida had this to say about Boulder: “Boulder has reached this beautiful sweet spot, where it has many advantages of a university town — tech and talent and openness — but without many of the costs and traffic and congestion that may disadvantage incumbent centers of innovation.”

In other words, Boulder has been the paragon of a creative-class community that gives business new innovative energy and is a catalyst for entrepreneurial ventures. It’s the kind of place where the mix of knowledge workers, artists and intellectuals enjoy the “productive collisions” (a term popularized by Nobel Prize winning CU researcher and Boulder resident Tom Cech) that generate new ideas and have the capacity to quickly develop those ideas into startup enterprises.

So, what has happened since Florida wrote “The Rise of the Creative Class” back in 2002? Here’s a quote right out of Florida’s new book: “[A]s innovative and productive as the economies of superstar cities may be, their most advantaged residents haul in the lion’s share of the gains. Their less advantaged working and service classes are falling further behind, unable to keep pace with rising housing costs.” Does that sound like a familiar community?

Florida’s book further speaks in terms of inequities with social and political ramifications, as high housing prices push everyone but the “elites” out of the urban core. He hasn’t yet seen a decline in innovation as a consequence in the cities he’s studied, but I posit that it can’t be far behind, as communities such as Boulder become increasingly less affordable and accessible to entry-level workers at some of our most prestigious businesses, let alone service workers, research scientists, professors and artists.

The red flags are all around us – Recent studies find that all of Boulder County is in a housing crisis, with “no entry-level housing options” left in Boulder County. Access to our community is further exacerbated by traffic congestion from the thousands of workers that commute in and out of town on a daily basis. And the final proof is in the strain that our employers face trying to fill positions in everything from computer to science fields with a talent pool that has dwindled to an average of 15 and 21 applicants, respectively, for every 100 open jobs.

It’s this tightening access to talent that is most troubling from an economic perspective. We are rightly proud of the incredible intellectual capacity that our community draws, having been recognized as the most highly educated workforce in the United States. This talented workforce, in turn, is critical to powering the innovative business climate that sustains our economy — helping our startup enterprises and more-established companies thrive throughout their development stages. That is why, when jobs go unfilled due to a lack of qualified candidates and local businesses openly consider moves to areas with a more diverse talent pool, the writing is on the wall with respect to a disturbing trend.

And finally, it’s clear there is something special about Boulder’s character that we’d all hate to lose. We might refer to it nonchalantly as our “funky vibe,” but leave it to Richard Florida to capture it statistically in his “Bohemian Index” which measures a community’s percentage of creative-industry professionals, such as painters, dancers and authors. These are the individuals that give Boulder its color, but they also are the foundation for the unique character that is the essence of the creative-class dynamics at the root of our economic success.

Therein lies the very existential opportunity for our community. Yes, these issues present a threat not just to Boulder’s economy, but our distinctive character. We clearly are at a tipping point: Our housing is becoming unaffordable, and access to our community is constrained. These are all elements of the new urban crisis. Fortunately, Boulder has a history of confronting challenges such as this and turning them into platforms for building an even stronger and more resilient community. I will address the steps we can take to seize this opportunity in future columns. As a hint, check out what Richard Florida terms, “Urbanism for all,” and I’ll see you next month in the Boulder Business Center.

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