

Richard Florida on Infrastructure, Competitiveness, and Economy

DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION Mediaplanet asked urbanist Richard Florida about how the Canadian economy, infrastructure, and environment are linked — and what this means for our future.

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Richard Florida, one of the world's leading urbanists, is the founder of the Creative Class Group, a researcher, professor, serving as university professor and Director of Cities at the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto. Below, he explores the impact of infrastructure on economic competitiveness and productivity.

Mediaplanet: What's the role that infrastructure plays in developing Canada's economic competitiveness?

Richard Florida: Infrastructure is one of the most important features of economic competitiveness. It connects Canada to the rest of the world. Business, trade, and tourism don't flow to places without adequate infrastructure connections, including airports, seaports, and strong domestic road and rail networks. In cities, smaller-scale infrastructure — including quality mass transit, bike lanes, and safe pedestrian infrastructure — supports the clustering of people and ideas that's essential for innovation and economic growth.

Increasingly, the most talented, ambitious workers and companies are choosing to be in the most dense, walkable, urban neighbourhoods with high-quality non-car infrastructure. Infrastructure can also be part of the housing affordability equation. High-capacity mass transit like subways and light rail can connect more affordable areas to expensive, high-opportunity ones.

Where are the main infrastructure gaps hindering Canadian productivity?

Right now, Canada needs to think more strategically about improving our air connectivity. In an increasingly globalized world, high-capacity international airports that are well-connected to core cities are essential for economic growth. We also need to get more people out of cars and onto public transportations, bikes, and other non-car mobility options.

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This is important for the environment, public health, public safety, and economic competitiveness. In Canada and elsewhere, there's not enough thinking about human-scale infrastructure and the pedestrian-level experience of cities. This kind of infrastructure has a huge bearing on quality of life, and is a major contributor to economic growth and productivity.

Where do the main opportunities for growth and progress lie within this environment?

Public-private partnerships are an exciting opportunity area — not only with developers and construction firms, but with local employers. Companies are starting to recognize the value of high-quality infrastructure to productivity, employee retention, and employee satisfaction. New infrastructure funds and investment mechanisms should be explored, including value capture financing, congestion pricing, and federal-level subsidies for transit and bikes.

What are some of the priorities and objectives that Canadian decision-makers should address to give Canada a competitive edge, improve productivity, and grow the economy?

Policymakers, important stakeholders, and voters need to be shown the close interconnection between infrastructure and prosperity. Indeed, infrastructure and economic development can't be seen as separate issues. This is clear in the case of major transit hubs and airports. But more messaging and outreach should also make the case that people-centric infrastructure like bike lanes and high-quality pedestrian environments also promote economic growth.

What is trade-enabling infrastructure and what effect does it have on economic health?

Seaports and freight rail depots are obvious examples of trade-enabling infrastructure. But that's not the extent of it. Airports, transit, and pedestrian-scale infrastructure create the clustering and in-person interactions that are essential for the creative knowledge economy. Making people more mobile fosters new trade and business opportunities.

What's the role that innovation and long-term planning play in developing Canada's infrastructure and thus its economic competitiveness?

Infrastructure investment is a gift that keeps on giving. Infrastructure stimulates development, creating new pathways and nodes of growth, like the high-density housing that rises around new subway lines. As infrastructure grows older, it ceases to be thought of as infrastructure and simply becomes part of the landscape and people's everyday experience of the city. Yet, it's so important, and constantly needs to be renewed. Long-term infrastructure planning is essential in identifying future needs, and creating the environments and mobility solutions for future generations.