

[Stauffer] A 21st Century Boom Town?



by Todd Stauffer
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When we launched the Jackson Free Press seven years ago this week, it was with a cover story on Jackson's "creative class." We noted how high Jackson had appeared in the rankings of professor Richard Florida's seminal book, "Rise of the Creative Class," given our size, not to mention the perception of Jackson as the sleepy capital near the buckle of the Bible Belt. Part of our thinking when we put together the JFP business plan was to focus our news and entertainment coverage on Jackson's young (and young-at-heart) professionals, service workers and civic-minded citizens. Through that we could thrive as a print and Web publication.

Seven years later as the JFP rolls into Volume 8, I still hear from people surprised, amazed and (at least, more often than not) pleased to see the JFP is still kicking and—in fact—growing. Revenues have never been higher at the JFP (knock wood), despite the economy and the general challenge the newspaper industry faces.

Indeed, we think that a newsweekly is well-positioned to handle some of the turbulence in the newspaper biz and to surf from a print-dominated world to a digital-dominated world without seeing the quality of our journalism suffer. That's hopefully evidenced by the increased page count, the high-quality stories by our staff and freelancers, and the number of advertising and marketing partners we have.

We're also pleased to be sponsoring more local events than ever and championing a "Think Local First" attitude among our readers, which I believe is incredibly important for Jackson to maintain its authenticity while maintaining and building a locally owned base of entrepreneurs, contractors, professionals, and others who can reinvest in Jackson

and push the city towards progress.

Which brings me back to Richard Florida. In his latest book, "Who's Your City?." Florida expands on the work that he's done in previous books to speak to two audiences. First, the book gives cities a sense of what they need to do to attract and keep the best and the brightest. Second, the book gives guidance to individuals trying to make the very important choice of where they want to live.

For the "Who's Your City, Florida's group created the "Place and Happiness" survey, conducted with the Gallup organization. In it, he learned that three factors combine to determine how happy someone is going to be with their city—aesthetics, basic services and openness. (Those factors, incidentally, come in quite a bit higher than others he surveyed for including "physical and economic security" and "leadership.")

People appreciate a town that has good services. Necessities like roads, health care and affordable housing play into the "basic services" equation—if you live or work in and around UMC, Fondren, out Woodrow Wilson or anywhere else that has recently had the road paved, you might literally experience a little extra satisfaction with your commute thanks to the smooth road and brightly painted lines and arrows. (If your electricity goes out often or the buses don't run on time, that'll start to get on your nerves.)

The second most important factor? Aesthetics. Florida calls it the "beauty premium" and likens the logic to that of buying a car. Years ago, cars offered huge differences in fundamental quality and safety, and were purchased accordingly.

In recent decades, the basic functionality of nearly any car on the road is a given, so people tend to gravitate more toward features, style and design. The assumption is that living in U.S. cities (for the most part) is similar—basic services tend to work—so you look more for aesthetics, which is why towns like Portland, San Francisco, New York and even New Orleans can top the list of places people want to live despite what might seem to be big negatives (like a lack of leadership or high property crime).

The third most important factor—and more so for younger adults—is openness. Florida is famous for his "Bohemian-Gay Index" introduced in "Rise of the Creative Class" and criticized by conservatives; in "Who's Your City" he once again defends the statistical correlation between a high concentration of artistic and gay populations to higher property values and higher incomes in a given region. Why? The bohemian-gay population is driven by (and creates) pleasing urban esthetics, and they're attracted to (and help foster) more openness and tolerance in a community.

Openness doesn't just track with gay issues or artists and bohemians. Florida notes, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, that openness is key to retaining the demographic most sought after if you want your city to thrive: recent college graduates.

Statistically speaking, when graduates leave home, they don't come back. If they don't settle in your city now, they likely won't later. That's important for cities (and states) that

experience "brain drain" to realize; while you may think that young people are going to sow their oats and then come back home to start a family, the truth is that many, many of those young people leave Mississippi and then stay in Austin, Portland, Denver, Chicago, northern California or wherever it is that they lit out for. And the reason for that is simple—those places offer basic services, they offer pleasing aesthetics, and they revel in openness.

What does that mean for Jackson? If we want to grow, then we need to get funky, and do it in a hurry. We need to get green—not just environmentally, but public-park-wise. We need biking corridors, access to the Pearl River, more public art, street festivals, and we need to dust off that plan for a Town Creek Riverwalk and see what we can come up with.

But most of all, it boils down to openness. Unless our plan is to become a "certified retirement community" (in which case we should be taking better care of the golf courses), we need to put a little New Orleans (or Austin or Portland) in our attitude and remember to celebrate differences. That attitude—in support of arts, diversity and a little bit of "weird"—will complement the loft buildings, retails, and restaurants, and really help us build a 21st century boom town.