

# Virginia should go for class, not crass

The "creative class" is the catchiest catch phrase to come out of city planners' mouths in years.

It's the new knowledge worker, the new urbanism, the new regionalism, the new 18-hour downtown, the new mixed-use, in essence, the new win-win. And, as with any kids' catch phrase that is suddenly known to all their parents, it's kind of over.

No offense to Richard Florida — author of the best-selling book "The Rise of the Creative Class" who now has a day job at George Mason University — because I believe in his principles, his vision for cities and his observations of tech-friendliness and live-and-let-work tolerance. He's right about a lot, and what he's really talking about is what people who love cities have been talking about all along — we care about where we live.

And we'd rather it not be in a strip mall. Or over an appetizer sampler platter at the Olive Garden. Or listening to zany morning DJs in a two-hour morning commute to the office.

But in the economic development rush to get into the creative-class act — a Greater Washington Initiative committee I was part of earlier this year began to dissect creative-class issues, and Fairfax officials are hosting a summit on the matter — we're at risk of losing some of the message, or in some cases, downright ignoring it.

This means you, Northern Virginia.

First, the good news: The counties that make up the biggest chunk of Northern Virginia's living and working population finally are working together and going for a shared goal: biotech-hub status at long last. (Actually, before cities and counties across the country wanted to be creative-class hubs, they wanted to be biotech hubs, but fading fads could be the least of Virginia's problems at the moment.)

Loudoun, Prince William and Fairfax counties have the makings of an incredibly focused force up their economic development sleeves. And, betting big on a few key projects and some existing fast-growing circumstances, they're bound to get a big return on working and playing well with their neighbors.

This week, Loudoun County unveils its Howard Hughes Medical Institute on the \$500 million Janelia Farm campus, full of impressive scientist types who could've gone anywhere. They chose Ashburn. Go figure.

But of course they did. The county might not have much in the way of venture capital or wet labs, but it does have plenty of space, a few tax breaks and a passion for achieving player status. It's no Montgomery County yet, but add in a

1,500-acre business park and a \$325 million Eli Lilly manufacturing plant in Prince William County, and things are starting to look as promising as they did in Montgomery County 25 years ago. It's a start.

At the same time, there are some setbacks to this creative-class status. Let's recap.

**Creative:** Major medical and life science research facilities opening in your backyard.

**Not-so creative:** George Allen and Jim Webb bickering in your front yard.

**Creative:** Incentives to lure the

brightest scientific minds in the world to your county.

**Not-so creative:** Trying to keep your state from becoming the most popular recurring redneck joke on "Saturday Night Live."

**Creative:** Rallying the region to put aside its inbred competitiveness to work toward a common, high-minded goal such as biotech brilliance.

**Not-so creative:** Spending political capital trying to outlaw — and re-outlaw — domestic partnerships to the point where you infuriate big business, small business and straight and gay couples alike.

The point should be obvious: If we decide to keep courting the creative class, we have to remember that tolerance and tech-savvy go hand in hand. Smart workers don't want to move to a state full of racist or intolerant or otherwise not-smart caricatures. The Hughes institute is a great notch in the region's biotech belt. Tabloid-friendly anti-gay or racist remarks, however, will get more TV coverage for Virginia every time.

"We improved the probability that some companies will want to locate here. There's no question about that, but we didn't make it 100 percent," Janelia Farm Director Gerry Rubin says in this week's cover story by staff reporters Vandana Sinha and Joe Coombs. "But just having us is not going to do it."

His chief operating officer, Cheryl Moore, agrees Northern Virginia is on the move: "I wouldn't say it's there yet, but there's a buzz."

Now it's up to Northern Virginia to decide: Will its buzz come from the creative-class masses — or late-night talk show hosts looking for crass laughs?



## So There

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