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Creating Class Rising by James Sawyer

Almost two years ago, this column referenced Richard Florida and his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Since then, he has published another bestseller, *Who's Your City*. He has also developed a robust consultancy called the Creative Class Group. This group of consultants holds workshops called Creative Communities Leadership Projects that “give emerging leaders the tools they need to generate greater economic prosperity in their region.” This Spring, they will be bringing those tools to bear on Roanoke.

The City of Roanoke engaged the group and will be responsible for administering the year-long project. The group will accept applications from members of the community who are willing to commit four or five hours per week for the next year. From that group of applicants, they will tap 30 emerging leaders to become “Creative Connectors.” According to the City they will represent a diverse cross-section of the community as defined by background, industry, age, race, orientation, and experience. The team’s task will involve working with the community to build a more authentic and prosperous region through the creation of sustainable projects. Furthermore, this group will encourage the entire community to support these projects, which will be aimed at fostering a creative base for Roanoke.

The project kicks off with a two-day seminar for the selected leaders on March 30 and 31, where the Creative Class Group will work with them to build an understanding of the creative economy. The proprietary framework is based on Richard Florida’s

4T’s of economic development: Talent, Technology, Tolerance and Territory Assets. They also prepare a tool kit and playbook equipped with the latest community-building practices and the most current regional economic demographic information.

Roanoke will prove to be an interesting case study for the Creative Class Group. In his latest book, *Who’s Your City?*, Richard Florida chronicles the “Rise of the Mega Region.” His research shows that talent tends to cluster around the cities where innovation occurs. This creates a virtuous cycle that causes successful cities to grow and become connected with other successful cities. For example, the largest of these Mega Regions, “Bos-Wash,” stretches from Boston through New York to Washington, D.C. Another, “Char-Lanta,” clusters around Raleigh’s Research Triangle, stretches through the banking center of Charlotte, and down through Atlanta. Roanoke happens to exist in the void between those Mega Regions.

It will be interesting to see how this reality factors into the assessment of Roanoke’s long-term prospects. We’ve got to

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consider how our neighboring Mega Regions will contribute to our success. The issue of regionalism has been front and center for many years in Roanoke. Our economic development authorities continue to consider regionalism a key to progress. The moving target has been the definition of our region. While the City is sponsoring the project, the Creative Class Group will need to think about issues in a regional and mega-regional context.

Regardless of what that the 30 Creative Connectors end up implementing over the next year, our new affiliation with the Creative Class Group will yield enough exposure to put Roanoke on the radar, if not on the map. As the author of two bestsellers, Richard Florida brings a following that is made up of the very people we are trying to attract. The members of the Creative Class who read his books and blogs will see that Roanoke "gets it." That alone will generate more buzz than any media buy.

The buzz will also put us on the hot seat to make the most of the opportunity and produce some positive results. That means we'll need to attract creative talent, support the development of new technologies, promote tolerance and leverage our territory assets. And, we'll need to do it in a way that's measurable. To provide a comprehensive empirical understanding of the region, the Creative Class Group employs multiple economic models, quality of place frameworks, and a broad range of variables, including over 30 economic indicators.

The process promises to be inclusive and transparent. It will not be a plan developed behind closed doors by an exclusive group and carried out by an inner circle of supporters. The Creative Connectors will be charged with bringing community members to the table, working with organizations to build consensus and actually carrying out the plans. The entire process will be open and accessible through public meetings, alternative media and blogs. And, the group will be connected to other communities around the country that have been through the process.

As a participant from Tallahassee described the Creative Communities Leadership Project, "I'm very excited about the project and in fact, feel as if this is not going to be another 'white paper' no one will ever read, but rather actions that will definitely impact this area for years to come." For those of us in Roanoke who take on the commitment, let's plan to support their efforts and help turn this project into a better quality of life.



James Sawyer is a graduate of Washington & Lee University and the Wake Forest University Executive MBA program. He is Executive Creative Director at RightMinds in Richmond. He lives in Roanoke and is available for marketing consulting for local clients. Visit www.mindshot.biz for more information.

