

# Star-Telegram

## DFW needs a more creative strategy to keep growing jobs

By Mitchell Schnurman

[mschnurman@star-telegram.com](mailto:mschnurman@star-telegram.com)



After almost four hours of dissecting the economic strengths and weaknesses of North Texas, urban planner Richard Florida was exasperated.

"We gotta change the way we live," Florida said Tuesday. "I don't know how much more obvious this can be."

Since November 2010, Florida's consulting firm has been studying the region in collaboration with the University of Texas at Arlington. They released some early results that are predictable (paltry rankings on biking, walking and public transit), reassuring (job sectors more complementary than competitive) and unsettling (much job growth comes from poaching other regions).

But various panel discussions kept returning to transportation and the gridlock that appears to be inevitable. Billions of dollars in new highways have been built in North Texas, and that still hasn't kept pace with the increase in population and registered vehicles.

Long commutes are a great drag on efficiency, and denser living, not sprawl, is proving to be a powerful economic driver. That's especially true among the coveted creative class that Florida first identified a decade ago.

Except that North Texas doesn't look like most giant metro areas, with jobs and transit concentrated in the core. It's more like a network of nodes, Florida said, stretching from Dallas to Fort Worth, Plano to Arlington, Aledo to McKinney. At some point, that grid needs to stop expanding outward and become denser instead.

"This isn't just a feel-good argument," Florida said. "This economic region, as it grows, is going to have to think of another transportation and living model."

Most of the audience likely agreed, although no consensus emerged on how to get there -- not surprising, given that North Texas has wrestled with the same problem for a couple of decades.

About 100 people attended the Tuesday morning conference, focusing largely on regional economic issues and ways to work together. It was sponsored by UTA and The Dallas Morning News.

UTA hopes to create a broader conversation on the region's future, and with Florida, it's generating original research and pulling together stakeholders and thought leaders.

"What we're trying to do is build a new model for the nation," UTA President James Spaniolo said about the North Texas economy.

That starts with a deeper understanding of what's working and what's not. Florida's firm, the Creative Class Group, analyzed data in part to assess the community's appeal to knowledge workers. It also examined industry clusters and differences within the region.

Fort Worth-Arlington scored highest on transportation, logistics and manufacturing, and biomedical looked promising. Dallas-Plano excelled in information technology, telecommunications, business services and publishing. That mix, Florida said, shows that job sectors are more complementary than competitive.

Interesting fact: Creative-class workers on the Dallas side are paid an average of 11 percent more. And Dallas has almost three times more of them.

By Florida's definition, the creative class includes scientists, engineers, professors, artists, designers and other professionals who earn much higher wages and have an outsized role in economic growth. They also tend to like denser living and amenities such as street scenes, mass transit and a sense of place. Tolerance is an important trait, too.

Those don't sound like strengths for all of North Texas, yet the area still created more jobs than any other. The explanation: "You've been able to grow by poaching people from other regions," Florida said. "That's not a sustainable strategy."

At least not when the economy turns, and workers have more options on where to work and live. That's when cool places become even more important. Among major metros, North Texas ranks near the bottom on research and science, arts and recreation, and public transit, the group reported. The region's share of creative-class workers sits in the middle of the pack.

While North Texas has many universities, they're not funded near the level of colleges in competing cities, according to Florida. So the first fix is to ramp up spending on higher education. Produce more of your own creative class, and then have the jobs and amenities to keep them.

Florida said there's no easy formula to become a beacon for these workers. Make real investments in the quality of place, and do the hard slog of building institutions. And somehow, some way, figure out a transportation fix.

Mitchell Schnurman's column appears Sundays and Thursdays. 817-390-7821, Twitter: [@mitchschnurman](https://twitter.com/mitchschnurman)