



Turning a Corner

Posted on [October 2, 2013](#)

Renowned 'urbanist' Richard Florida sees a unique recovery in Detroit
Pages 20-21

Last February, best-selling author and renowned “urbanist” Dr. Richard Florida took the stage at the 2013 Detroit Policy Conference, providing his analysis of Detroit’s continued comeback at MotorCity Casino Hotel. At the event, Florida stressed the importance of tackling urban development with an entrepreneurial spirit and remarked on how impressive the amount of progress made in Detroit has been.

About five months after his keynote speech, Detroit filed for bankruptcy, kicking off a nationwide discussion about the state of the city. The *Detroiter* caught up with Florida to discuss how bankruptcy has impacted his views of the Motor City.



You recently wrote “Detroit’s Not Dead.” Why do you believe Detroit is positioned for a rebirth?

I don’t want to diminish the city of Detroit’s problems, which are daunting to say the very least, but the city is far from dead, despite what so many in the media insist. Bankruptcy and economic despair are two very different things

and they need to be disentangled. The city’s economic problems have been accumulating for the better part of a halfcentury; they are products of deindustrialization, white flight, and sprawl. Now for the first time in a long, long time, we are seeing real investment in the downtown core, coming from a range of private sector interests and foundations. I call it a new kind of private-public partnership, with “new money” from current businesses and investors leading and leveraging old money from the traditional foundations. This is really unique. So, the city was already turning a corner at precisely the time bankruptcy hit. The budget challenges are tough and painful, but they’ve been put off for far too long. Finally the city’s fiscal house is being put in order and that can only be a good thing for the future.

The greater Detroit region has really substantial assets. First, it's big. With 4.5 to 5 million or even more people, depending on how you draw the boundaries, it is twice as big as a metro like Pittsburgh. With nearly \$200 billion in economic output, its economy is larger than New Zealand's and not much smaller than Hong Kong's or Singapore's. When you include nearby Ann Arbor (which ranks 4th on my recent creativity index ranking, just behind Boston, San Francisco and Boulder) and East Lansing, you have one of the largest agglomerations of great research universities in the U.S., with the University of Michigan, Michigan State, Wayne State and more. The region has one of the greatest clusters of auto-related tech talent and industrial design talent on the planet. My most recent figures show it to rank ninth among the places growing the most jobs for recent college grads, and also to have one of the nation's leading rates of productivity growth. And of course the unbelievable legacy of musical innovation – from blues and R&B to Motown, from the early rock of Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels to Iggy and the Stooges, and the MC5 to The White Stripes, from rap to electronica – Detroit is likely the single most musically innovative place on the planet.

To get there, the city and suburbs will have to get beyond their longstanding rifts and work together. For that, the suburbs will have to come to the table.

At the Detroit Policy Conference you mentioned that Detroit has achieved a level of progress over the past decade that you never would have imagined possible. How has Detroit's filing for bankruptcy impacted your perception?

My perceptions haven't really changed. Detroit's fiscal woes have been a long time in the making. The city has a long history of incompetent and, at times, corrupt politics, and they are finally catching up to it. Bankruptcy is a restart, not a defeat. Detroit is turning a corner; the first signs of recovery and revitalization, as small as they may be, are finally starting to appear.

What role will regional collaboration play in Detroit's recovery and how will the bankruptcy impact those efforts?

Greater Detroit is home to significant assets: great research universities, world-class research, development and design capabilities, abundant musical and creative talent, a global airport, and, after years of neglect, a massive new effort to invest in and revitalize its downtown core. Of course many of these assets are concentrated outside the city, in its suburbs and adjacent communities. For that reason, the city's rebirth depends on true regional cooperation. The city's bankruptcy provides the deep crisis that may at long last spur for the cooperation from the suburbs and outlying areas that long run recovery requires. As I remarked at the Detroit Policy Conference last winter, "The city-suburb thing has to go away. If I hear it again, I'm going to start screaming."



Considering the juxtaposition of the city's bankruptcy filing with the positive momentum in the private sector, how accurate do you believe the portrayal of Detroit in the national and international media has been?

Clearly, the old media, the Internet and social media have run rampant with the very predictable stories of Detroit's imminent demise.

They focus on Detroit's problems – joblessness, high murder rates, long waits for emergency services and hugenumbers of abandoned buildings. We've all gawked at the ruin porn. Bankruptcy seems to have especially blinded the media. It hasn't done anywhere near enough to cover the things that are improving in Detroit or the local efforts that are working to turn the city around. That's why I wrote my post in *The Atlantic Cities*, "Don't Let Bankruptcy Fool You: Detroit's Not Dead" and went on air at CNN and PBS to talk about it. The great irony is all this has happened just when the city and its core are turning around.

While headlines continue to focus on Detroit's bankruptcy, how does its financial health compare to other cities around the country?

Detroit's financial troubles are obviously at one end of the spectrum. That said, other cities are facing financial challenges as well – rising pension costs, impending infrastructure needs and budget reductions. More cities are likely to run into problems down the road. Heck, look at our nation's deficit.

Where do you see Detroit in 10 years?

I think we'll be more than pleasantly surprised. I see a core that is much more filled in. I see an economy that is much stronger and more resilient than it has been in decades. I see a place with great walkable neighborhoods, in the city as well as the suburbs. I see a place at the cutting edge of university science and tech research.

What I worry about are the region's and city's still very real divides. As Karen Dumas, the former press secretary to Mayor Bing put it in *The Detroit News* last summer, the emergent "new" Detroit is mostly young, white and educated. "They stand in stark contrast to native Detroiters – most of whom are African Americans and many who are undereducated and unemployed – who have stayed and stuck it out over the years, through challenge and controversy." The challenge for the city and region moving forward is to spur further urban economic revitalization while bridging those divisions.

This is where the efforts of Detroit's public partnership initiatives like Detroit Future City are so important. Detroit, as I talked about at the Policy Conference, was and is the place that launched the old social compact between management and labor. Prompted by its great union movement, it was where the then-revolutionary idea that you should pay your workers well enough that they can afford to buy the products they manufacture, got its start. Detroit can lead now with a new social compact for the post industrial knowledge economy, one that values and rewards the full talents and creative contributions of all Detroiters, city and suburban, creative, working, and service class alike.

Richard Florida is a professor at the University of Toronto and NYU, and senior editor of The Atlantic.