

What future are we planning? Author Richard Florida weighs in on Don Iveson's 'innovation corridor'



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Is an innovation corridor like a giant hack-a-thon? Incumbent mayor Don Iveson wants an innovation corridor along the LRT line from the University of Alberta to NAIT to build on Startup Edmonton's success. Here University of Alberta students Riley Dawson (right) and Kent Rasmussen work on their Twitter trading application at Startup Edmonton Feb. 8, 2014. *IAN KUCERAK / POSTMEDIA*

Mayoral incumbent Don Iveson says he's "betting on Edmonton" and has pitched a vision of new, hip, medium-density neighbourhoods along one LRT corridor to attract and keep the next generation of talent for a wave of technology-based jobs.

In New York City, Cornell Tech university is building new shared office space with technology startups on Roosevelt Island, mixing entrepreneurs and researchers to hasten good ideas to market.

Edmonton's "innovation corridor" along the LRT between the University of Alberta and NAIT would be like that, says Iveson, clustering the technology sector in a newly hip downtown, building on the Google DeepMind investment and existing research on artificial intelligence at the U of A.

It's a marriage of urban planning and economic growth that takes a page from U.S urban studies theorist Richard Florida's bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

But in his latest book, *The New Urban Crisis*, Florida warns this type of growth inevitably comes with increased inequality.

We spoke with the author by phone. This interview has been edited for length.



Author Richard Florida poses for a portrait at the Martin Prosperity Institute at the MaRS Discovery Centre in Toronto in 2010. Aaron Lynett

Q: Your recent book paints a grim picture for the cities that aren't New York, London and Toronto that are trying to compete for a piece of the start-up and technology sector. You say it's a winner-take-all world. Entrepreneurs benefit from being located in these larger technology clusters.

How would you rank Edmonton's chances for success?

A: First of all, Edmonton has to (refocus on knowledge and technology). I don't think Edmonton has any choice. Edmonton is an oil resource town and produces a lot of equipment related to natural resources. You can't depend on that.

But I think Edmonton, Calgary and Houston stand out as global examples of places that have used resources well to invest in knowledge. You have to do it.

Q: It seems like you're saying the physical set-up is critical — you're talking about clustering, about creating that urban environment where creative people want to be, to walk and to meet friends at a coffee shop. Why is that important?

A: It's just what people started to want. Increasingly, people have come to realize that living far from work, especially in places like Toronto and New York, is just not desirable.

They want to be able to see one another. They also want to be part of a career where they have networks, where they can meet and mingle. They want to be part of a place that's thriving.

That said, not everyone wants to live in the downtown core or trendy arts district; others want to live in a lovely suburb and commute by train or bus or car. A great city or a great metropolitan area has all of that.

But clustering is a driver of economic growth. That's not my value judgment, that's trying to chronicle what is.

Q: Housing affordability is already a concern here in our core neighbourhoods and infill is often expensive. In your book, you talk about this being inevitable, but also mitigating this through new buildings and multi-family rental. Can you describe how that works in practice?

A: Canada has an affordability crisis nationwide. Toronto and Vancouver are some of the most unaffordable cities in the world, but compared to many other metros of its size in North America, Edmonton is also relatively expensive.

The knee-jerk response is that if we just build more (housing), it will get more affordable. But I think what's happened in the short run is that we built more condominiums for rich people.

We need affordable housing, and we need a commitment to build affordable housing. Our local governments can help do that using tax revenues. Or our local governments can say to universities and development companies, 'Look, you're building housing for your people. You should commit to build more affordable housing.' You should be building affordable housing so your service workers, the people who work in your gymnasiums or cafeterias, can live near where they work.

Q: Iveson's running against 12 different challengers, few who share his vision, and there's fear of change here. What would you say to people who want to stay focused on a more car-oriented or blue-collar economy?

A: History is littered with cities that didn't adapt. There's no way you can hold back the force of economic development. This clustering force, this clustering of innovating people, is the future.

But look at those cautionary tales of cities that have become unequal and unaffordable because they didn't adapt. Look at Toronto or Vancouver, the wrenching process they're going through now because they didn't build enough transit and housing. Now they're trying to adapt and maybe they will. But they're at a crisis point. They can no longer channel growth within their current structure.

Edmonton has the chance now to anticipate it and build a better future. But there's no going back.

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