

POSTED TORONTO

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Richard Florida goes to city hall, quotes Karl Marx



By Allison Hanes, National Post

Quoting Karl Marx, cab drivers and his factory-worker father, celebrity intellectual Richard Florida went to Toronto city hall today to tell councillors that improving the lot of service-sector workers is key to the city's prosperity.

Toronto's economic development committee invited Prof. Florida, an American academic and author now at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, to enlighten on the way out of the current global financial crisis.

Although Prof. Florida's emphasis on the creative class – workers in intellectually driven fields like the arts, technology, film, communications, engineering, science and research – have drawn criticism for being elitist, today he focused on a different class of worker.

He compared the situation of workers from the hotel, restaurant, retail and customer service sectors to the lot of exploited factory workers at the turn of the 20th century.

Because of their outsized presence in Toronto's workforce, he posited that improving their incomes, work conditions and happiness could be the key to Toronto's future prosperity – just as the rise of the unionized labourer became the foundation of the middle class in post-war North America.

"Those jobs are local and hard to outsource offshore," he said. "We really, really, really have to think about how to upgrade that work."

After his presentation, the committee decided to request a report from city staff on a possible creative stimulus package – to nurture the growth of creative industries – and to hold a summit with service workers in the fall.

Greg Clark, a U.K.-based advisor to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, also addressed the committee via pre-recorded audiotape, suggesting Toronto use the economic downturn as an "opportunity" to make "structural changes."

Prof. Florida noted he doesn't like the words "crisis" or "depression" or even "recession" to describe the current downturn. He prefers the term "great reset" – which he coined and will appear in a forthcoming book.

Today's session was billed as a public forum on the economy, but included just two experts, a handful of councillors and a couple dozen city staff. Last month the committee heard from financial, real estate and economic experts behind closed doors, while last week city representatives participated in an economic forum organized by the Toronto Board of Trade and chaired by Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion.

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Councillor Kyle Rae, chair of the economic development committee, said those stakeholders weren't at today's session because they were probably "summitted out."

He took umbrage at suggestions Toronto doesn't play nice with the rest of the region, saying he has now been to Markham twice and works very well with the city's mayor.

While councillors defended Toronto's ability to cooperate with its neighbours, Prof. Florida encouraged the metropolis to think even further afield.

The axis of Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto Waterloo and Chicago is what he called a "mega-region" that has the potential to be a world powerhouse.

Toronto and Waterloo – a hotbed of technological and scientific discovery – are natural partners in particular, Prof. Florida said.

Waterloo has the ideas that lead to upstart industries with the help of venture capital, he said, while Toronto is the kind of place those knowledge industry professors want to locate.