

Economist tells Atlantic City conference that ‘creative class’ is future of work force

By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, October 16, 2012 6:36 pm

ATLANTIC CITY — What does it take to revitalize Atlantic City and other places hit hard by the recession, the housing-market collapse and the vanishing manufacturing industry?

Economist Richard Florida answers by looking at how this market upheaval differs from others in American history.

Florida was the keynote speaker Tuesday at the New Jersey Governor’s Conference on Housing and Economic Development at the Atlantic City Convention Center.

A senior editor for The Atlantic magazine, Florida is author of “The Great Reset,” which examines how the economics of cities is changing in the wake of the recession.

“What we’re going through isn’t just a financial collapse or a great recession. It’s a great reset,” he said. “We’re witnessing the decline of an older order, an order that gave my parents, my brother and I a great life trajectory based on mass production, factories and the great American working-class economy powered by suburbanization.”

Florida also explained the concept behind his other best-seller, “The Rise of the Creative Class,” which examined job growth in the arts, entertainment, media, health care and information technology.

Few workers today can rely on a steady job from a single employer that allows them to work and live in the same place their entire lives as his parents did in Newark.

Likewise, higher-paying manufacturing jobs such as his father’s factory job have been largely replaced by lower-paying service-industry positions.

“Only 22 percent of the American work force is employed in blue-collar jobs,” he said. “Less than 20 percent of New Jersey workers are. Less than 6 percent of the work force touches products in a factory. But 1.2 million of us in New Jersey and more than 40 million in the U.S. are part of a new creative class — people who create new technology, manage enterprises, educate us and deliver our health care.”

Florida said this “creative class” is where the economy will see job growth. And this creative class is attracted not only by the promise of good jobs but by the places where they want to live. He calls this the quality of place.

Florida did not address how his theories might be applied to Atlantic City. He did not take questions Tuesday because of scheduling constraints. But people who attended his keynote address offered some ideas.

“What Atlantic City is doing now is what he was talking about,” said Christina Clemans, a Realtor from Cape May. “It’s not just about gambling. There is more diversity of entertainment and more energy in the arts. I think they’re on the right track.”

Christopher Panella, an architect from Collingswood, said Atlantic City could take Florida’s example of shoe retailer Zappos.com, which moved its headquarters from the suburbs to the heart of Las Vegas to give its employees more housing options and revitalize the downtown.

Many of Atlantic City’s workers live in bedroom communities in suburban Cape May and Atlantic counties. If they moved to the city, they could save money and time in their daily commute and help the city’s local economy, he said.

Rob Reid, of Absecon, thinks the city could be attractive to young workers such as his two grown sons, who fit a demographic he called “eco-boomers.” These are ecologically minded people born between 1977 and 1995, he said.

“They want to live in an area where they don’t need a car and can use mass transit,” he said. “They don’t care about the size of their apartment because they don’t spend any time in it. There are education opportunities here from Stockton College to stimulate creativity. It just takes having an affection for your community.”

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