



Sharon Rapoport: Creative Connectors and the State of the Star City

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DAY TWO: The State We're In

Today and Tuesday are the full-day sessions for the Richard Florida Creative Connectors project. Our homework assignment this week was to submit a bio and a two-page document on 'The State of Roanoke.' The content of this document was to be based not just on our own opinion, but on the collective opinions of the people we associate with in Roanoke. Mine's below. Let me know if you agree with it.

I will be blogging every chance I get on SCH, and tweeting through my Twitter account (**FarmerSharonRap**) during the process.

STATE OF THE STAR CITY

Location, location, location. The one thing most Roanokers agree on is how choice we are geographically. The gorgeous mountain setting with countless natural resources, an extremely desirable temperate climate with all four seasons, the proximity to major US cities and our midway point on a major north/south interstate (I-81) all add up to the kind of location that many cities could only dream about. Indeed, outdoor enthusiasts sometimes refer to us as the East Coast's California. We need to find better ways to capitalize on these enormous benefits.

Identity Crisis. Roanokers in general have mastered the art of self-deprecation. We have a confidence problem that is so widespread that almost everyone agrees and admits that we have one, which in many ways only adds to the problem. My observation is that this phenomenon is not at play quite as much when Roanokers talk amongst themselves, but tends to be more of a factor when people from 'outside' the region, especially those from

large urban areas, come into the conversation. We need to address this problem because it eats away at our image from the inside out and from the outside in.

The Lost Colony. If you ask most people in the Eastern United States if they know about Roanoke, they will often either answer no, or say something akin to ‘oh, yes...isn’t that where Sir Walter Raleigh lost his colony?’. Unfortunately, the ‘lost’ part is fairly accurate when it comes to our image, or ‘brand’. The good news is, for the most part, we don’t have a bad image. The bad news is that we don’t have an image at all. To most outsiders, we are a blank slate that is dying to be scrawled upon. What an opportunity!

Too many cooks, not enough chefs. There are a lot of ‘leaders’ in the region — indeed, many would say too many. Multiple municipalities complicate matters and often cause a lack of focus, not to mention a clash of egos. But there are only a handful of leaders who are visionaries. And there is no real public outcry for visionary leadership, There is mostly apathy, cynicism and a sense of defeat on this front. That needs to change.

Fanning the flames. There are pockets of creativity and innovation in the area, and some of it is very exciting. But often, because they are not embraced in a big enough way, we lose these movers and shakers because they cannot make it happen here. They need to be more actively encouraged, supported and promoted.

Over the rainbow. Although there is some diversity and a small, established gay community, we have a long way to go. There is little integration. The undercurrent in Roanoke is traditional and conservative. This creates a lack of openness and an unwillingness to change – not the kind of environment that promotes creativity. We need to latch onto initiatives like the Local Colors festival, and make them more of the norm rather than the exception.

Timing is everything. Okay, the economy sucks. But truthfully, it seems like a ripe time in Roanoke for real change. With the art museum opening, a serious music scene coming to the forefront downtown, and the opportunities for new technologies and infrastructure that could possibly be government-funded, there are many reasons to feel hopeful. Let’s get to work.

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