

It's CPR time for Creative Tampa Bay economic organization

By [Robert Trigaux](#), Times Business Columnist
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It sounds absurd, but Creative Tampa Bay isn't creative anymore. I'm not sure it's even awake, having hit the snooze button in recent years.

The group's website says it's a "catalyst" for economic and social development. It feels more catatonic.

CTB needs some serious CPR.

Creative Tampa Bay's current chairman, Danny Watts, 29, does not debate that the organization needs serious reinvention. In an interview Friday, Watts — a volunteer whose more than full-time job is with an area technology firm — says an overhaul and refocus of Creative Tampa Bay's mission is on the way in the coming months.

"A core of the Creative Tampa Bay board remains committed," Watts says. "We want to position the organization as an entity that will help creative community organizations get on their feet."

It seemed so simple when Creative Tampa Bay was formed in 2003. The organization quickly emerged as the linchpin between creative types like artists and entrepreneurs, and the region's powerful business community.

Now that role is shared by many more area organizations. That is a testament in part to Creative Tampa Bay's success, but also a challenge for the group to claim a still-relevant niche going forward.

"We want to continue growing the creative economy," Watts says. He dismisses at least most of a suggestion that the painful recession drained Creative Tampa Bay of its resources and energy.

"You can't blame the economy for whatever is happening," says Watts, who grew up in the Tampa Bay area and now lives in Tampa. "It's only caused us to work harder for what we need to accomplish. We do not feel we were a victim of the downturn."

Watts and the remaining Creative Tampa Bay board are looking for supporters and feedback on how the organization can best help people going forward. (Got an idea? Want to help? Email Watts and the board at info@creativetampabay.com.)

The regional organization burst on the scene in the wake of the "creative economy" concepts pitched in person here nearly a decade ago by then-Carnegie-Mellon urban economist Richard Florida.

In April 2003, he inspired a business audience at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center with an idea that regional economies that encourage diversity, innovation and arts will, in turn, attract smart and more talented people. That will lure more competitive businesses looking to hire such folks.

And that, the economist argued, would mean more and better-quality jobs.

In hindsight, some of Richard Florida's remarks may sound idealistic. They are. But a lot of people and some major economic development groups here have taken at least some of his concepts to heart. I routinely hear Richard Florida's name invoked today by area business leaders trying to raise the economic (and education) bar.

That's kind of impressive for a guy who gave one speech here many years ago.

Economist Florida's vision appeared in his first book on the topic, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. He has since fine-tuned many of those ideas in followup books like *The Flight of the Creative Class* (in which talent is spreading globally) and, now, the 10th anniversary update of his *The Rise of the Creative Class*. He now teaches and consults as a professor at the University of Toronto and writes regularly for Atlantic magazine and website.

Nobody believed conjuring up a creative economy would be easy. When Richard Florida first spoke here, Tampa Bay was no creative super-region like San Francisco/Silicon Valley or Boston or Austin, Texas.

It still isn't even close. But it is vastly improved from 10 years ago.

Part of that progress belongs to Creative Tampa Bay. But over time, the group faltered. Its outdated website includes "the buzz" newsletter whose last posting was in May. Its events listing dried up after March.

This is probably not what Creative Tampa Bay's founders would want. Business leader Deanne Roberts, who died in January after a long fight with cancer, was a major regional force in the economic development community. She tried to make Tampa Bay a livelier place and more

attractive to young and talented people, co-founding Creative Tampa Bay and later starting the Emerge Tampa movement for young people starting out in business here.

Roberts and her Creative Tampa Bay co-founders were also realists. If Creative Tampa Bay has accomplished much of its job, maybe its time has come and gone.

If there are innovative groups like Tampa Bay WaVE (for entrepreneurs) or Awesome Tampa Bay (which hands out \$1,000 grants for creative community ideas) or Pasco EDC's microloan program, is that enough? If there's a greater regional endorsement of innovation than existed before, is that enough?

Watts argues that there's still good to be done by a revitalized Creative Tampa Bay.

"Some of us thought that while our original mission has been fulfilled, the organization still has a purpose."

Watts is right. Perhaps more than ever, the Tampa Bay economy needs a forceful reminder that a creative economy is a stronger and more competitive economy. Especially as we struggle out of these tough economic times.

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