

Trying to attract the 'creative class'

by Duncan Adams

A popular economic development guru believes that a region's tolerance and diversity, its quality of life and its support for what he describes as the "creative class" pave the way for economic and population growth.

According to Richard Florida: "The distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to 'create meaningful new forms.' "

In November, the board of directors for the Roanoke Valley Economic Development Partnership announced new attraction strategies aligned in meaningful ways with Florida's work.

Industrial and commercial recruitment of new businesses and support for existing businesses -- its historic backbone -- became just one of four strategies designed to boost the region's sluggish population growth.

Florida's ideas, along with quality of life research by former Roanoke College President Sabine O'Hara, influenced the new plan.

In 2004, Florida spoke in Roanoke.

About a month later, an opinion piece by businessman Victor Iannello, then president of the board of directors for the partnership, appeared in the newspaper.

He mentioned Florida's work and wrote that "research shows that young, talented professionals -- the demographic we're lacking in the Roanoke region -- are not focused just on their jobs. What they are looking for is quality of place."

'Money's worth'

This year, Beth Doughty was hired as the partnership's new executive director to shepherd its new, four-pronged "program of work" -- the organization's description of its radical shift in strategies to boost the regional economy.

Jerry Burgess, county administrator for Botetourt County, said he is enthusiastic about the partnership's new course and confident about Doughty's hand at the helm.

Based on a population formula, Botetourt County will contribute nearly \$66,000 to the partnership this fiscal year.

Other government contributors are the cities of Roanoke, Salem and Covington, the counties of Alleghany, Craig and Franklin, and the town of Vinton.

"I fully believe, especially with Beth there, that we are getting our money's worth," Burgess said. "And I am a huge supporter of the new program of work."

The business community is playing a much more active role in the partnership, he said, and helped lead a major fundraising campaign that garnered pledges for about \$6.7 million.

"The business community has stepped up," Burgess added. "I'm a government guy, but I think the governments were dominating too much."

Now, he said, "we've got a forum where we can maybe get something done."

The new strategies won't yield overnight results, he said. "There is a lot of work to be done before we run."

One big step, he said, will be a major redesign of the partnership's Web site, which he described as an antique in a world where entrepreneurs and young professionals rely on the Internet and online social networking to learn about a city, a county or a region.

"Your Web site has got to tell your story," he said.

Burgess is a Doughty fan.

"She brings incredible experience in the region and knowledge of economic development and community development," he said.

Richard Florida

In 2002, Florida published "The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life." The best-selling book was wildly influential in the arena of economic development.

He has written that the "super-creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects."

These days, many economic development professionals accept the notion that high-income workers, entrepreneurs and even established companies base relocation decisions on such things as cultural amenities, recreational opportunities, diversity in race, ethnicity and sexual preference, affordable housing and other measures of a region's livability.

'Going places'

Employees at Meridium Software recently confirmed in interviews that these high-tech workers considered the region's quality of life before deciding to move to the Roanoke Valley.

However, most indicated the first draw was the Meridium job.

Doughty acknowledged she has not seen hard data proving that Florida's ideas produce real results.

Mark Heath, president and chief executive officer for the Martinsville-Henry County Economic Development Corp., said he takes Florida's ideas "with a grain of salt."

But he observed that the world of work has changed and is changing.

"The jobs of the future are not going to look like the jobs of the past," he said.

Doughty offered similar thoughts.

"The world is changing at breakneck speed," she said. "We have to reach people who choose where to live before they look for a job."

The alternative, she said, is continuing to do the same thing while expecting different results.

Roanoke is beginning to change, Doughty said.

As evidence, she cited the new art museum, downtown living, the expansion of the greenways network (which she said people have come to expect communities to offer), Carilion Clinic's ambitious plans and other signs of progress.

"We are going places as a region, finally."