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Economic future requires thriving cities

First published: Sunday, January 10, 2010

In a recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, "public intellectual" Richard Florida observed that "most big economic shocks ultimately leave the economic landscape transformed." He noted that the "long depression" from 1873 to 1896 led to replacement of mill towns like Troy by great factory cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and Buffalo, while the Great Depression of the 1930s started the "slow but inexorable rise of the suburbs" and the economic malaise of the '70s was followed by the fall of the Rust Belt cities "coupled with explosion of growth in the Sun Belt".

Florida predicts the current Great Recession, like its predecessor international economic crises, "will accelerate the rise and fall of specific places within the U.S. -- and reverse the fortunes of other cities and regions". This may not bode well for the Capital Region.

"Every phase or epoch of capitalism," Florida writes, "has its own distinct geography, or what economic geographers call the 'spatial fix' for the era. The physical character of the economy -- the way land is used, the location of homes and businesses, the physical infrastructure that ties everything together -- shapes consumption, production, and innovation."

Sprawling suburbanization was the spatial fix for the industrial age with its mass production and credit economy. Our Great Recession may be ending that economy. Increasingly, our economy will depend on "generating and transporting ideas". Florida declares, "Places that thrive today are those with the highest velocity of ideas, the highest density of talented and creative people, the highest rate of metabolism. Velocity and density are not words people use when describing the suburbs. The economy is driven by key urban areas; a different geography is required." These are mega-regions and "smaller, talent-attracting innovation centers inside them -- places like Silicon Valley, Boulder, Austin, and the North Carolina Research Triangle."

We could be one of the premier innovation centers with our nano college, our health, education and environmental assets and our location. Yet, the signs for our future are negative.

The Times Union recently reported the "Wealthy forsake region's cities." Regional planner Rocky Ferraro said, "Many people who have a choice are leaving our cities because of issues of quality of life. Cities (here) don't have the panache they had years ago."

The Times Union also told us that Schenectady's Mont Pleasant is at risk. Post offices and

parishes in Albany are closing and a Christmas Day letter to the editor stated: "Albany is cold and desolate and depressed, abandoned to the richer suburbs and repetitive malls." That leaves our suburbs which are not associated with the velocity and density to drive the emerging economy.

Instead of innovation, we continue to have decay and abandonment of the urban areas that should be the engines of our economy. Last month I wrote about the plight of Kiernan Plaza. The Steuben Athletic Club in downtown Albany has closed and the YMCA threatens to close its facility on Washington Avenue. It has a great urban location, accessible by foot to serve both high-end urban neighborhoods and distressed areas like West Hill and Arbor Hill.

Closing the Washington Avenue Y is a shocker to me. In April 2008 I praised the Capital District YMCA for its willingness and success in bridging our cities and suburbs with its services and ideals. I was impressed that it had saved failing Ys in Albany and Schenectady in the early 90s and then built "a thriving system of YMCAs in our cities and suburbs with common and strong family and community building, and healthy living missions." We need this for our cities and suburbs alike in every aspect of regional life.

As a region, we have state government and enough institutions like the University at Albany, RPI and medical centers to keep us marginally afloat. That is not enough.

Where are our leaders who understand that the emerging economy depends on thriving cities to support the new ways of "living, working and producing"?

Instead of moving forward, city residents will use their energy fighting to keep their treasured Y and other threatened assets while those in the suburbs quietly maintain their false sense of security.

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