



Urban theorist Richard Florida tells Kalamazoo gathering that walkable, talent-rich places are where growth is being found



American urban studies theorist, Richard Florida, spoke at Populus 2014 Friday at the State Theatre in Downtown Kalamazoo. About 175 people attended Populus 2014 to hear Florida among other speakers. Populus is a one-day event focused on helping change policy making and decision making in communities.



By [Al Jones | ajones5@mlive.com](mailto:ajones5@mlive.com)

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KALAMAZOO, MI – Communities where companies can find pools of talent, where talented people can interact with others and where tolerance is evident as well as technology, is where economic growth is being found, urban theorist Richard Florida said.

“In the creative economy, in the knowledge economy, where we’re working with our minds, we have to be recharged and the quality of the place (has to be high),” said Florida, who visited Kalamazoo on Friday as the keynote speaker at [Populus 2014](#), a one-day gathering programmed by regional economic development organization Southwest Michigan First.

“If a place is a high-quality place, it’s walkable, it’s interactive, it’s near transit,” Florida said. “If it’s the kind of place people feel engaged, it’s not only good for people, their real estate prices come up and people want to be there.”

The author of 2002’s “The Rise of the Creative Class” and a global research professor at New York University, restated some of the research that contributed to that book and others, and emphasized his assertion of the creative economy, one in which the U.S. economy is being shaped by, and economic growth is developing around, cities and regions with pools of creative people.

He said that about 40 million Americans, 30 percent of the U.S. workforce, make up the creative class -- knowledge-based workers such as those in education, health care, finance, law and business; and problem-solvers and innovators such as scientists, engineers, artists, designers and computer programmers.

To build such communities, Florida said planners need to consider their resources in terms of technology, talent, tolerance and territorial assets. Based on a national poll he conducted with Gallup, he said Michigan ranks 13th among the 50 states in technology but ranks 37th in talent.

It ranks 33rd in terms of tolerance, he said. That involves how open the region is to diversity, he said and, “How many different kinds of people? Are you a welcoming place for all sorts of people? Immigrants? Ethnic diversity? Racial diversity? The gay community? Single people? Married people? families of all sorts?”

What about others?

What about those not identified as part of the creative class?

Florida said 66 to 70 million Americans are involved in the service industry and they are falling behind economically. He said value needs to be added to the creative work they do and “We have to improve the quality of service jobs.”

He said communities need to make sure they “improve the wages and working conditions to engage those workers so they add value. But most importantly, we have to build quality of place.

We have to build communities where each and every person can work together, all the classes can come together. “

By doing so, he said, “We can have not just economic growth, but inclusive growth.”

“The emphasis that has been placed on technology (as an economic development resource) has to also be placed on talent and tolerance,” Florida said. “And it all comes together in a fourth ‘T’ I call Territorial Assets or Quality of Place.”

He said that includes attractive resources such as great historical buildings, “the environmental assets, the natural assets, the green spaces, public spaces where we meet and greet. The third places – the bars, the taverns, the coffee shops where we can meet and mingle.”

He said vibrant, real communities can be “right here in Kalamazoo, right up the road in Grand Rapids, right here in Southwest Michigan, right across the state of Michigan. ... We can build cities and communities where true creativity, (where) each and every individual can be proud.”

About the event

Florida was the keynote speaker at [Populus 2014](#), a one-day gathering billed as a means to inspire people to make positive change in public policy and their communities. It included presentations on: urban planning; the inner-city turnaround of Benton Harbor; the new [kzoouncaged.com](#), a blog to introduce interesting working people in Greater Kalamazoo; and the YMCA Youth In Government program, which immerses high school and middle school students in situations where they act as state legislators, lobbyists and other officials.

About 175 people – many of whom were business owners, civic leaders and organizational leaders – gathered Friday at the State Theatre in downtown Kalamazoo for the event. They included the mayors of Kalamazoo and Portage, Bobby Hopewell and Pete Strazdas, respectively; Kalamazoo County Supervisor Peter Battani; Michigan Rep. Sean McCann; leaders of nonprofit organizations; leaders of Chamber of Commerce organizations from Grand Rapids and Lansing; various city of Kalamazoo department heads; and others.

Southwest Michigan First Vice President [Tim Terrentine](#), who was master of ceremonies for the event, said the gathering was for anyone interested in participating in community change and would include people of all types, including individuals simply interested in hearing Richard Florida and other speakers.

SWMF board member Jim Heath said he understood how the \$100-per-person cost to attend the event and its day-long schedule could preclude some people from attending. But he said it was for anyone interested in participating in public policy and it costs a lot to put on such an event and bring in the caliber of speakers involved.

The Kalamazoo Gazette/Mlive Media Group was a co-sponsor of the event. The presenting sponsor was Consumers Energy. General sponsors were the Hinman Co., PlazaCorp, Michigan State Housing Development Authority, Muchmore, Harrington, Smalley & Associates Inc. A

reception that followed the event at the Cityscape events center was sponsored by The Urban Land Institute of Michigan.

Redeveloping urban areas

Urban redevelopment these days is about more than redeveloping downtown areas, said another speaker, land-use strategist and developer Christopher Leinberger. It's about urbanizing the suburbs. He said the movement is toward developing safe, walkable urban places.

"It's those millennials," he said of young people. "They are demanding a different way of living than the way they grew up."

He said Hollywood, which does more consumer research than any other industry, has long been adept at showing on TV and in the movies what Americans aspire to be.

"So think back to the 1950s with 'I Love Lucy' and 'Leave It to Beaver,' most of us didn't live in the suburbs but they were showing us the aspiration that we had to move to the suburbs," said Leinberger, who is also a professor of Practice and director of the Graduate Real Estate Development Program at the University of Michigan. "'Dick Van Dyke' and 'The Brady Bunch' were all set in drivable suburban places."

By the 1980s, the majority of Americans had made the shift to the suburbs or wanted to.

"Now fast forward to what our children grew up with: 'Cheers,' 'Seinfeld,' 'Friends,' 'Sex in The City,' 'How I Met Your Mother,'" he said. "All (are) set in safe, vibrant, walkable urban places. This is what the rising generation aspires to."

He said that in the post-World war II era, American cities and their developers were very successful at building drivable sub-urban places, fueling the auto industry, construction and other industries. He said the movement now is toward safe, vibrant, walkable urban places.

"We have a massive pent-up demand for walkable urban areas," Leinberger said. And he warned that Kalamazoo and other Southwest Michigan cities "are lagging behind and have a long, long way to go" to catch up with that trend.

In Benton Harbor

Gregory Vaughn, senior vice president and chief operating officer of Berrien County economic development organization The Cornerstone Alliance, said a willingness to listen to people and collaboration between the public and private sectors were necessary to build the trust and progress necessary to begin Benton Harbor's turnaround. The city was devastated economically by the downsizing of major employer Whirlpool Corp. and other businesses in the 1980s. The city lost in the 6,000 jobs.

He said the ongoing [Habor Shores](#) development is a result of that cooperation. It is a 530-acre development in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph that includes a Jack Nicklaus Signature public golf course, residential units, space for two hotels, space for businesses and marinas.

Business writer [Al Jones](#) may be contacted at ajones5@mlive.com. Follow me on Twitter at [ajones5_al](#).