

Richard Florida leaves mark on Naples

By LAURA LAYDEN

Thursday, May 21, 2009

Richard Florida has come and gone.

But the best-selling author's brief stop in Naples on Wednesday has left its mark. His words have inspired community and business leaders and left them thinking about how to achieve what he calls the three "Ts" for economic growth: technology, talent and tolerance.

Collier County needs more technology and talent, but tolerance could be an even tougher challenge, said Kevin Barnhill, president of the Southwest Florida Regional Technology Partnership, created last year to encourage the growth of high-tech companies in the region.

Florida, the author of "The Rise of the Creative Class" and several other best-selling books, emphasized the need to for communities to embrace creative people, from Bohemians to gays and lesbians, during his speech at the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club.

"I think that's going to be the next challenge," Barnhill said. "It's how are we going to embrace this tolerance for innovation in our very traditional community?"

Florida was the last speaker brought in for Project Innovation, a community-wide project launched by the Economic Development Council of Collier County last year to create an action plan to build a better, more sustainable economy. He drew a larger crowd than any other speaker. Hundreds jammed into a conference room across the street from the hotel.

"He validates what we are trying to do," Barnhill said. "He was able to get more than 400 people to think about technology."

On the technology front, there's still a lot of work to be done, he admits.

"We have over 40 companies that are members," Barnhill said. "We're looking to grow. That should be more like 200."

Florida discussed the need for networking among innovators and the need to showcase the talent and technology that are here to attract others.

Next week, the technology partnership will have its inaugural awards banquet to recognize companies that have used or created technology to overcome challenges. The event will be held May 28 from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Pelican Preserve Clubhouse in Fort Myers. Gene Landrum, a professor emeritus at Hodges University in Naples, will speak. His topic is “The Innovative Mind: Reprogramming What You Are to What You Want to Become.”

Landrum, who did his doctoral research on “The Innovator Personality” that inspired many books, will serve as a good follow-up to Florida, Barnhill said.

Florida exuded his passion for economic development and prosperity as he commanded the stage with his wit and rapid talk. He’s the founder of the Creative Class Group, an advisory firm that is “charting new trends in business and community” and the director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and a professor of business and creativity at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management. His newest book, “Who’s Your City,” is a national and international best-seller and has been featured as an Amazon Book of the Month.

Florida talked about what the area has going for it — and what it needs to work on.

The region, he said, is part of a mega center he calls “SoFlo” that stretches from Miami to Tampa and Orlando and has 15 million people and \$413 billion of economic input, making it one of the most productive in the country.

He said what’s lacking is more creative jobs and people. The creative sector makes up less than 20 percent of the economy in the Naples area, below the national average of about 33 percent, he said.

He understands open-mindedness and tolerance may be a challenge too in Collier County.

Florida worked the stage to bring home this message, that a strong economy relies on its people and their creativity, more than anything else.

“Every single human being is creative,” said Florida, who has worked as a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, and as a visiting fellow of the Brookings Institution.

He emphasized the importance of what he calls “quality of place.” People want clean air, clean water, green space and to live in a place that’s beautiful and invests in its history, he said.

Collier County has a lot going for it in that area and it’s an area community leaders have agreed to focus on as

part of the action plan that’s developing through Project Innovation.

Florida discussed what else great communities have including safety, economic opportunity and jobs and leadership.

He credited the community for its effort to come up with a shared vision for Collier County through Project Innovation — and the leadership behind it.

“Think big. Think broadly,” he told the crowd.

Tammie Nemecek, president and CEO of the Economic Development Council, said she was encouraged to hear Florida underscore the importance of including the community in efforts to build the economy.

“He reinforced that you have to have people engaged in the community,” she said. “You just got to be able to have that voice to make people invest in the economy.”

Florida encouraged leaders to look for ways to involve part-time residents in improving the economy. Nemecek said that was important advice she planned to follow. “I will work on that,” she said.

Peggy Wilson, a North Naples resident who owns an advertising agency, was impressed with Florida’s talk and she felt his energy. She said he made improving the economy and building the creative sector seem doable in Collier County.

“It’s nothing we can’t accomplish,” she said.

Though this was the last speaker for Project Innovation, it was the first Wilson had heard. She decided to come after hearing the buzz about his visit around town. She came with a friend.

“I’m glad I found it, at least now,” she said. “We’re on board.”

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