

A thriving community works with its strengths



ay you're running for office -- or better yet, voting. What are the smartest things to remember to help make your town, city, or county more prosperous and just?

The *BT* posed that question last month to Richard Florida, one of North America's best-known urban authorities, at an FIU luncheon hosted by North Miami Mayor Smith Joseph.

"Remember that you're part of a metropolitan area," he says, "and that you don't have to do all things and serve all masters."

Sounds simple, but it's not so easy in North Miami's wide-open municipal election, coming up May 14.

And one other thing to remember: citizenship is powerful.

Take the 15-year tangle to free up \$5 million earmarked for the city to develop the \$10.5 million Cagni Park on 135th Street and NE 9th Avenue, complete with an Olympic swimming pool. Who broke the jam? One could argue it was nine homeowner associations that repeatedly met at the office of Miami-Dade County Commissioner Jean Monestime, just a block from North Miami City

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Hall, when elected and appointed city folks wouldn't make the walk to meet him.

One can go on. Water and sewer, anyone?

The point: Neighborhood and homeowner groups, towns, cities, counties, the state, and federal government are interdependent parts of a shared system. If your town or city drops the ball, it's your right and duty to step in and make sure the ball stays in play.

Richard Florida is co-founder and editor at *The Atlantic's* CityLab, a website dedicated to journalism about the future of cities. He also teaches at the University of Toronto's School of Cities and its Rotman School of Management; a distinguished fellow at New York University's Schack Institute of Real Estate; and the author of

The Creative Class

and

The New Urban Crisis

. He splits his time between Toronto and Miami, where he has been an FIU Visiting Fellow since 2014.

He stresses that our county of 2.6 million and state of 21 million offer a booming economy, lamentable transportation, vast inequality, high creativity, and sea level rise right under our feet.

His advice for North Miami: Define your community's niche. Then leverage your location, multiculturalism, and diversity, and nurture your talent from around the world.

And be *just*.

"We've forgotten that word," Florida says. "We've focused on growth and innovation and competitiveness. I think qualifying all of them with 'inclusive' and 'just' and 'equitable' is great."

By nearly any measure, Greater Miami is among the nation's most unequal and least affordable

places.

Florida comes by his conviction honestly. Born in Newark in 1957, he grew up in middle-class stability in a modest suburban Cape Cod house. His dad, whom he frequently quotes, worked in an eyeglass factory, had a seventh-grade education, and got laid off in the mid-1970s. His mom took ads for the *Newark Star-Ledger*. His scholarship to Rutgers put him on a path to a Columbia Ph.D. In other words, he's the product of a once-thriving middle class that is dwindling today. His obsession with equity rivals his admiration for entrepreneurial society.

Today South Florida has a burgeoning educated and creative class of about 1 million, or roughly 30 percent of the workforce; great universities; and roughly 340,000 students. It includes the nation's richest ZIP code (Fisher Island, where the average annual income is \$2.2 million). Its 6 million people generate \$300 billion in economic output, just under Singapore's. Combine it with Orlando and Tampa, and 15 million people generate \$750 billion, about the same as the Netherlands.

Florida says Miami now ranks eighth among U.S. metro areas for venture capital in high-tech startups, at \$1.3 billion a year. A decade ago it barely registered a blip.

This success also spells trouble, however, driving away not only the people who serve our food and staff our hotels, but also those who teach our young, police our streets, and care for our sick.

The very nature of South Florida's economy worsens this inequality. More than 50 percent of its jobs are in the service economy, second only to Las Vegas. In addition, our tourism-oriented economy has long relied on poorly paid African-American and Afro-Caribbean labor. Where the creative class might make an average of \$75,000-\$80,000 a year, the 2 million in the service sector make \$30,000 a year. Median household income in North Miami is about \$39,000.

Say you make \$75,000 a year and spend \$25,000 on housing. That leaves \$50,000. But say you make \$30,000 and spend \$20,000 on housing. That leaves you with \$10,000. How do you manage?

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Add in race, and the wealth gap yawns even wider. An explosive report released in late February by Ohio State University, Duke University, and the Insight Center for Community Economic Development concludes that African American households in Miami have a median of \$11 in savings, compared with \$200 for Puerto Ricans, \$2000 for Afro-Caribbeans, \$3200 for Cubans, and \$10,750 for white households.

Is it any wonder that North Miami politicians running for office hear people complain about choosing between their water bill and medicine or food?

“There’s a high acceleration of high-net-worth people here,” Florida says. “Wealth is concentrated on shorelines. The disadvantaged are pushed inland.”

As developers cast their eyes beyond Little Haiti to the bonnie highlands of Liberty City and NW 7th Avenue, are we already well into the pain of climate gentrification?

Florida’s solutions may rankle some.

Inclusionary zoning. Earmark a substantial number of apartments in buildings at truly affordable rents of perhaps \$500 or \$800 a month, rather than the \$2000 “affordable” levels some developers call “workforce housing.” Florida notes that at his high-end building in New York, lower-income tenants use the same entrance and elevator, and go to the same gym.

Raising service wages. Real estate developers should reward companies that pay employees a decent minimum wage of, say, \$15 an hour, with generous rent abatements in higher-end properties.

Transportation. Florida signals this issue as urgent but praises Brightline and light rail, suggests imposing congestion rates in traffic-choked districts, and exploring water taxis.

“When we’re building things, we’re driven by business or people with money, rather than need,”

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Florida says. “Other cities are having a much more robust conversation about these issues than we are. We haven’t had a broader conversation about growth, inclusivity, and justice.”

Why wait for it to happen? Start it over coffee, check it out with the person across the table, who might be your economic/ethnic/political “opposite.” You just might come up with something together. Just as the most important weather is over your head, the most important politics is right in front of you, not on TV or in your newsfeed.

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