World-Class Communities

Driven by a need to spur economic growth at the close of the industrial era, towns, cities and regions are taking a close look at what they have to offer new industry in order to attract revenue and development. In the same breath, communities are evaluating the quality of life enjoyed by all its citizens. This self-examination often involves looking at old problems in a new light.

Many communities are looking to "re-invent" themselves by appraising their assets and challenges as they strategically plan for the future. Driven by a need to spur economic growth at the close of the industrial era, towns, cities, and regions are taking a close look at what they have to offer new industry in order to attract revenue and development. In the same breath, communities are evaluating the quality of life enjoyed by all its citizens. This self-examination often involves looking at old problems in a new light. Perhaps the problem of affordable housing, quality education, and job development should no longer be left to elected officials alone. Chambers of Commerce, large and small businesses, not-for-profit organizations, educational institutions, communities of faith, and governments are partnering in a new way to address the development, revitalization, and vitality of the community. That has been the case in a community sitting on the edge of a Great Lake, in southwestern Michigan.

A World-Class Community in the Making

Over a period of decades, economic and racial polarization between the city of Benton Harbor and the surrounding communities had created very different worlds for their respective citizens. Years of misunderstanding, unequal opportunities, and separation had led to an environment of mistrust, hostility, prejudices, and fear. However, as the communities entered the new millennium, there was a growing sense that the separateness, the unequal economic opportunities and conditions, and the biases could not go on. The effects of these conditions and this environment would eventually lead to wide-spread decay across all communities in the area and doom many to a future with no hope.

The work of a few very committed citizens galvanized a community to reflect on its past and to chart a new future of prosperity: a future that would not happen unless some courageous group of citizens made it so. They created a community-based organization to support the community-building activities and named it the Council for World-Class Communities (CWCC). Started by a spirited group of five volunteers, the CWCC now has thousands of members and friends.

Over the course of nearly ten months, more than 2000 people from all walks of life and backgrounds came together to attend to the issues of the past and lay the groundwork for a new and brighter future for the region. In a series of focus groups, structured interviews, and surveys, they reported a number of key ideas about their aspirations for creating a world-class community in the region as well as their observations about the factors that could impede progress toward this lofty goal.

In terms of a description of the various attributes of a world-class community, several themes emerged from their diverse perspectives. The citizens of all of our communities provided the following definition of what a world-class community should feel and look like.

Community Description of World-Class Communities

- An environment where all people are valued and respected
- Safety
- Prepared and hopeful youth
- Strong school systems that work for everyone
- New and growing businesses with a broad spectrum of jobs
- Rich variety of arts, culture, and leisure opportunities
- Affordable, quality housing
- Healthy and credible local government
- Full range of high-quality health care
- Strong citizen leadership
- Effective public transportation

These citizens also made key observations about what needs to be attended to in order to make the transition from the current status to becoming a world-class community. The various themes were:

1. The cities, townships, and communities of Berrien County are rich in assets that can support the transition to a world-class community.
2. Many people are willing to seek solutions and to make the effort successful, but most are not united around a strategy.
3. A bias towards going it alone is holding back all communities.
4. Economic disparity and the poverty among groups are amplifying issues of racism.
5. Infrastructure necessary for effective economic growth is lacking.
6. Fear of failing youth is a unifying concern.
7. Schools are not meeting the needs of a broad spectrum of students.
8. The promise of the City of Benton Harbor is unfulfilled.

This work has culminated into a cohesive vision statement for the broader communities and discreet mission statements for various components of the Northern Berrien County cities, townships, and communities. The vision of the CWCC is to:

Create a set of interdependent World-Class Communities where diversity and inclusion are the foundation and where no one is left behind.

The missions they defined for themselves were broken out into seven areas of community life as listed to the right.

Education Domain
[To] create an interdependent educational system of schools, colleges, and learning organizations in Berrien County founded on diversity and inclusion to ensure no learner is left behind.

Faith Domain
[To assure that] the healing presence of the faith community working together to positively influence the future of our interdependent communities.

Health and Wellness Domain
[To assure that] health care in a World-Class Community would be high quality, accessible, and affordable and be an integrated system providing comprehensive care for all.

Community Outreach Domain
To create ways to challenge prejudice and discrimination in our communities for all marginalized groups. To create ways to increase opportunities for interaction and to support all voices.

Business Domain
The business community embraces a climate to foster and encourage economic and personal growth, while adapting the vision of an inclusive business environment and leaving no one behind.

Economic Development Domain
[To create] a unified, interdependent economic development strategy for all of our communities.

Government Domain
To find common ground among our interdependent communities through leadership, exploring and implementing shared practices and resources to improve our quality of life, which is based on our commitment to diversity and inclusion so that no individual is left behind.

Each of these mission statements now serve as the foundation for strategy development and action plans being undertaken by the membership and allies in the various domains. On projects or initiatives requiring a number of domains, the CWCC organized Alliance Project Leaders to provide a focus for those complex activities.

- **Be highly diverse and inclusive**

- **Have high concentrations of talented and well-educated residents**

- **Have high concentrations of creative residents**

Regions with these characteristics are more likely to:

1. Retain home grown talent in search of high-quality lifestyles. This aspect correlates well with the community's aspiration for serving youth and education in the region.

2. Attract talent from the best and the brightest in the U.S., as well as highly trained newcomers from abroad. This is highly correlative to the community's aspiration for economic growth and viability of emerging and existing business enterprise.

3. Develop a thriving arts and culture region, which is conducive to the further development of human capital (capable and energized people) seeking stimulation and recreation.

4. Establish a highly tolerant community culture that is open to a wide range of diversity, including foreign-born residents, gay people, and people of color. This is highly correlative to the stated aspirations of the CWCC.

5. Attract technologists needed for innovation and competitive advantage in the knowledge economy.

Comparative Strategies for Economic and Community Development

The aspirations of the CWCC and its stakeholders are a challenge to everyone interested in the notions of economic and community development. There are a number of models that provide great insight into the mechanisms that drive the key measures and attributes of world-class communities. Of particular interest is the research being done by the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University. Led by Richard Florida, Ph.D., this research suggests that many of the issues at stake in the work of the CWCC are the key drivers for broad-based economic growth and quality of life enhancements in highly successful (even world-class) regions in our country.

In his book, *Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida argues that the most successful regions in the United States have a number of things in common that define their world-class status. His research suggests that highly successful regions (as measured by economic output, quality of life, quality of workforce, and quality and number of community assets) are those regions that are described in the left column.

The correlation of these indicators to economic growth, innovation, and quality of life is significant. The following table is a ranking of regions with populations of less than 250,000. This table provides a list of comparable benchmarks for the greater Twin Cities area.

Fig. A

Rank[a]	Region	Creativity[b]	Technology[b]	Innovation[b]	Diversity[b]
1	Santa Fe, NM	10	130	26	3
2	Gainesville, FL	2	170	30	48
3	Portland, ME	28	89	134	12
4	Burlington, VT	166	54	3	44
5	Lafayette, IN	36	96	33	152
6	Cedar Rapids, IA	61	21	10	238
7	Sherman, TX	39	107	98	102
8	Richland, WA	80	58	75	168
9	Iowa City, IA	110	167	28	75
10	State College, PA	124	124	25	120
11	Asheville, NC	93	177	117	6
12	Wilmington, NC	78	114	107	99
13	Lawrence, KS	106	162	84	62
14	Barnstable-Yarmouth, MA	231	125	31	43
15	Rochester, MN	165	22	2	243
16	Charlottesville, VA	51	163	78	145
17	Bryan-College Station, TX	3	161	53	229
18	San Luis Obispo, CA	172	110	90	143
19	Longview, TX	127	150	125	109
20	Springfield, IL	23	169	199	129
21	Greenville, NC	241	29	166	85
22	Eau Claire, WI	51	160	58	219
23	Athens, GA	237	199	82	7
24	Las Cruces, NM	49	198	203	84
25	Albany, GA	214	52	239	30
32*	**Benton Harbor, MI**	**236**	**101**	**91**	**151**

Data extrapolated from Florida, Richard 2002, The Rise of the Creative Class, New York: Basic Books.
Note: In some cases, the names of the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas have been shortened to reflect the core city in each area.
(a) Rank is for regions in given size class.
(b) Overall rank is based on all 268 regions for which data are available.
(*) Benton Harbor rank of 32 was highest rank for similar sized area in Michigan for which data are available.
Creativity score is based on R. Florida's Bohemian Index.
Technology score is based on the Milken Institute study America's High Tech Economy, (2000).
Innovation score is based on a measure of patented innovations per capita extracted from data published by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. R. Florida compiled this data (1999).
Diversity score is a compiled composite of R. Florida's Bohemian, Gay and Melting Pot Indices (2002).

A careful review of these statistics may reveal great insight into what makes for a highly successful small region such as the Northern Berrien County area. Close inspections of the "top 10 small regions" suggest that all regions of this size have significant advantages and growth opportunities. It appears they all feature at least one of the measures as a signature strength. The measures with the highest value (lowest ranking overall) are indicative of where greater emphasis can help leverage a community to progress towards becoming truly world class. Examples of regions ranking high on all of these measures (no matter their size) are outlined in Figure B. In this table, the data demonstrates the correlation between openness and inclusion at the community level and regional prosperity and quality of life for the majority of its residents.

Fig. B

Metropolitan Area	Technology Ranking	Diversity Ranking
San Francisco, CA	1	2
Boston, MA	2	6
Seattle, WA	3	5
Washington, DC	4	3
Dallas, TX	5	15
Los Angeles, CA	6	1
Chicago, IL	7	11
Atlanta, GA	8	14
Phoenix, AZ	9	21
New York, NY	10	4
Philadelphia, PA	11	32
San Diego, CA	12	7
Denver, CO	13	17
Austin, TX	14	8
Houston, TX	15	18

Note: Technology score is based on the Milken Institute study America's High Tech Economy, (2000).
Diversity score is a compiled composite of R. Florida's Bohemian, Gay and Melting Pot Indices (2002).

In summary, the aspirations of the CWCC are very much aligned with all that we empirically know about regional growth and prosperity patterns. It is also clear that the region will need to pull together and collaborate on high leverage projects designed to reduce the barriers of entry for new residents bringing a wide variety of diversity to the region.

In summary, the aspirations of the CWCC are very much aligned with all that we empirically know about regional growth and prosperity patterns. It is also clear that the region will need to pull together and collaborate on high leverage projects designed to reduce the barriers of entry for new residents bringing a wide variety of diversity to the region. It suggests that regions that possess an inclusive culture, that are friendly to people of color, foreign-born newcomers and people who openly identify themselves as gay correlates well to the regional ability to attract the quality and levels of diversity that drive innovation, regional economic development, and creation of amenities that enrich the lives of everyone.

Recommended Resources:

Barker, Joel (2002). *Wealth, Innovation and Diversity* (Video).

DeVol, Ross and Wong, Perry (1999). *America's High Tech Economy,* Los Angeles: Milken Institute.

Florida, Richard (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class,* New York: Basic Books.

Gladwell, Maxwell (2001). *The Tipping Point: How Small Things Can Make a Big Difference,* New York: Little Brown & Company.

Ray, Paul, (2001). *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World,* Pittsburgh, PA: Three Rivers Press.

Robinson, Marcus, Pfeffer, Charles, and Winters, Mary Frances (2000). *Focal Points on Diversity and Inclusion,* Rochester, NY: wetWare, Inc.