



### SEARCH

Advanced Search

### AUTHOR



Mr. John R. LaPlante

**Michigan***votes.org*

### TOP 10 FEATURES

Universal Tuition Tax Credits are the best way to advance school choice

Is the Michigan Education Association helping or hurting schools and students?

Seven Principles of Sound Public Policy

Six Habits of Fiscally Responsible School Districts

Michigan Privatization Report

Transforming Michigan's economy

Michigan Education Report

Great Myths of the Great Depression

The high cost of remedial education

With Clear Eyes, Sincere Hearts and Open Minds: A Second Look at Public Education in America

## Trying Too Hard to Be Cool

Posted: Mar. 4, 2005

The latest fad in urban planning and economic development theory is the idea that society's "creative class" is the cultural and economic salvation of cities and states. [Gov. Jennifer Granholm](#) has embraced the idea under the rubric of "Cool Cities." Among the underlying themes: attracting and retaining the under-40 crowd in urban areas; "walkable" communities; attention to the arts as a development tool; and 24/7 entertainment options.

But is turning your city into Manhattan (or SoHo, Greenwich Village, take your pick) worth the bother? Michigan officials from at least [120 cities](#) apparently thought so, applying for the \$100,000 worth of funds handed out to 17 cities last year for projects like an ice rink in Warren and a gay-and-lesbian community center in Ferndale. Under this program, it's fine (and even necessary) for politicians to tax and spend — as long as it's part of an effort to create a social environment with "buzz."

The governor's [State of the State](#) address gave an explanation behind the latest attempts to build an economy through government largesse: "This is a bottom-up movement in which nearly 80 of our communities have local commissions on cool that are uncorking the bottle of creativity and unleashing the genie of possibility — planning everything from bike paths to bookstores to attract more people and new businesses."

The effort owes much to the work of Richard Florida, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University. He observed that high-growth areas of the 1990s were more likely to have a large number of cultural amenities — for example, bike paths and an independent music scene — as well as a pluralistic and diverse culture.

Public officials across North America have taken Professor Florida's work to heart. Iowa, for instance, has a "director of cultural affairs" who argues: "Culture is no longer a frill. It is fuel (for growth)." Cincinnati gave \$40,000 to a local blues society; Austin, Texas erected a statue to rock star Stevie Ray Vaughan. The mayor of Winnipeg decried those who want public policy to be limited to "pipes, pavement and policing."

At first blush, Florida's prescriptions may sound reasonable. Bike paths? Why not? An independent local music scene? Austin, Texas has it, and they seem to be doing rather well. Isn't that where IBM-slayer Dell Computer is based?

And if it takes a little spending to attract the next generation of web designers, engineers and high-tech workers, why not? After all, the U.S. economy is increasingly based on services, which often require highly skilled and creative workers. Backbreaking labor is less important, and human capital is more important than ever. If a bike path will retain the younger generation (one goal of Gov. Granholm's initiatives), well, aren't they the future of the state?

### TOOLS



Print



Mail



SYNC



No Order



No Download

### CURRENT COMMENT

Fri., Mar. 9 - Sun., Mar. 11, 2007

#### Death Warmed Over

Resurrecting Michigan's death tax could drive more taxpayers out of state.

[CURRENT COMMENT ARCHIVE](#)

Mackinac Center in the  
**New York Times**



**RSS** ACCESS OUR RSS FEED

But as Steven Malanga wrote in a critique titled [The Curse of the Creative Class](#), Florida's ideas have a fatal flaw: They don't work.

The cities that score high on Professor Florida's "creative index," for example, have not had any more job growth since 1993 than cities that score low on the index, let alone more job growth than the U.S. economy as a whole. So much for the idea that socially "creative" cities have an edge on job creation.

In fact, even by Florida's own index, Malanga says, the least creative cities outperform the most creative ones by 60 percent in job growth. Nor do Professor Florida's "creative" cities outperform other cities in generating high-growth companies.

It is the fundamentals that keep cities moving ahead: efficient government, low taxes, quality basic services. Even high-tax New York City benefited when, under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, it figured out a way to provide effective policing. Overall, though, low taxes are a winner, both for [cities](#) and for [states](#) as well. People respond: Over the last decade, low-tax states have gained population, while high-tax states have lost it.

As the Mackinac Center has already noted, the Cool Cities effort suffers from the same weakness as many ill-conceived economic development efforts: [centralized planning](#). Not only does the Cool Cities campaign assume that government can foster growth through its own strategy (based on flawed reasoning); it assumes that public officials, not private citizens, are in the best position to recognize what is "cool."

It's easy for public officials, like anyone else, to be caught up in "paradigm-shifting" fads like those propagated by Professor Florida. Much more difficult, however, are the simple yet effective tasks of improving public services in ways that are both cost-effective and respectful of the boundaries of civil and political society. Bureaucracy, inertia and entrenched special interests stand in the way of fundamental reforms that would depoliticize society by allowing the [private sector](#) more opportunity to improve the quality of urban life.

Michigan has much going for it. With a diversifying economy, an abundance of water and recreational opportunities, proximity to markets both domestic and international, it can be a vibrant state — as long as it doesn't try too hard to be "cool."

#####

John R. LaPlante is an adjunct scholar with the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Center are properly cited.

**Categories:** [Economic Development](#); [Government, Michigan](#)



Print



Mail



SYNC



No Order



No Download



Top of Page



Home



Search

---

Would you like to see more information like this? [Learn how you can help](#) the Mackinac Center provide incisive, accurate and timely analysis of critical Michigan issues.

Copyright © 2005 Mackinac Center for Public Policy  
[Terms of Use](#) | [Contribute](#) | [Contact Us](#)