Business

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[El Paso ranks 74th out of 331]

Victor Calzada / el Paso Times

Angela Mora, inside the El Paso Museum of Art last week, is coordinator of the New Texico Creative Leadership Project. It's aimed at finding ways to tap into this area's creativity to improve the quality of life here and to stimulate economic growth. Mora also works for the city of El Paso Museums and Cultural Affairs Department, where the project is based.

CREATIVE CITIES

El Paso tries new route to economic growth

By Vic Kolenc
El Paso Times

Economic development isn't just about attracting companies; it's also about attracting and keeping talented people, and that takes a creative city.

That's the view of economist and social theorist Richard Florida, author of "The Rise of the Creative Class," the national best-seller first published in 2002.

A group of 31 El Pasoans has taken Florida's theories to heart, and with the help of the Richard Florida Creativity Group, based in Washington D.C., are trying to find ways to tap into this area's creativity to improve the quality of life here and to stimulate economic growth.

The El Paso group is part of the New Texico Creative Cities Leadership Project, begun last August by the city of El Paso in conjunction with Florida's firm, which is being paid for its assistance.

El Paso and Tacoma, Wash., are the first cities to be part of Florida's Creative Cities Leadership Project. Last week, Florida's company announced the start of similar projects in Tallahassee, Fla., Charlotte, N.C., and Duluth-Superior, Minn.

"We know from our research that in order to prosper, cities must support innovation, be open to self-expression and create great places to work and play," Florida said in a written response to questions from the El Paso Times.

"We've found over and over again that people are the leading economic driver of prosperity. Companies will go where they can tap a quality work force," Florida wrote. "The El Paso-Juárez region is poised to attract many companies from the northern U.S. and southern Mexico. To make the most of this potential, the region needs to think about how it will support the people who do and will live (here)."

The project is aimed at giving El Paso the "tools and knowledge it needs to build a stronger economy that is authentic to this region and sustainable," he said.

Florida's firm is being paid about $110,000 to assist the El Paso project for a year — about $50,000 from the city and the rest from corporate sponsors and participants' tuition — said Angela Mora, project coordinator and deputy director of tourism, marketing and communications for the city of El Paso Museums and Cultural Affairs Department, where the project is based.

El Paso ranks 74th among 331 metro areas in the United States on Florida's updated Creativity Index, which scores cities for Florida's "3 T's of economic development": Technology, talent, and tolerance (of all types of people). Austin ranks first. Las Cruces ranks 67th.

Among metro areas with populations between 500,000 and 1 million, El Paso ranks 10th. Albuquerque is first in that population category.

El Paso City Manager Joyce Wilson said the New Texico

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Creativity index

How selected U.S. metro areas ranked in Richard Florida's creativity index, which scores cities for technology, talent and tolerance for all types of people:

1. Austin.
2. San Francisco.
3. Seattle.
4. Burlington, Vt.
5. Boston.
11. (tie) Washington-Baltimore.
11. (tie) Albuquerque.
14. Denver.
19. San Diego.
21. Dallas-Fort Worth.
28. Phoenix.
32. Tucson.
37. Houston.
46. San Antonio.
65. Santa Fe.
67. Las Cruces.
74. El Paso.
95. Las Vegas.
109. McAllen, Texas.
126. Laredo, Texas.
132. Memphis, Tenn.

Source: "The Rise of the Creative Class," by Richard Florida.

▶ New Texico initiatives 2E

Creative

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project is "an economic development and quality-of-life project."

"I hope it develops an awareness in the community of the creative assets we have here.... We have a lot of creativity in this community that if we harness and release, can empower the citizens to do great things for our city."

Mora, the Texico project coordinator, said the project is like a lab to test Florida's theories. The plan is to make the project long-term, with some participants leaving and some new ones entering each year, she said.

The project's 31-member class came up with six initiatives during a brainstorming session with Florida to focus on his "3 T's of economic development," Mora said.

The initiatives: a soon-to-begin El Paso-Juárez Binational Arts & Culture District design competition; a Border Canvas project to bring an attention-grabbing public art project here by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who most recently did "The Gates" in Central Park in New York, or by area artists; ecotourism development and promotion; a Binational Technology Alliance; a mentoring program for all ages of people; and an idea-support network to provide resources for people with innovative project ideas.

"I heard Florida speak (in El Paso in December 2005) and thought his ideas were pretty good, and (I) agreed (that) for us to attract more jobs, and more quality of life, we needed to make El Paso more vibrant — increasing the arts, culture and technology, said Julie Wong, 46, dean of students at the University of Texas at El Paso, who moved to El Paso from California 2½ years ago. "I think we have a lot here, but a lot more to do to increase the quality of life."

During a two-day workshop with Florida last September, the Texico project participants were told this area "should capitalize on being one of the largest binational borders in the world," Wong said. That's why she's heading the committee organizing the El Paso-Juárez Binational Arts & Cultural District design competition.

"We are taking about a 30-block area from the El Paso Museum of Art to the Museo Historico in Juárez and giving" teams of university students and other nonprofessionals the "challenge of developing this area" into an arts and cultural district, Wong said. The competition is scheduled to open Thursday, and entries are due May 14. The winning team will get $7,500, and two finalists will get $2,500 each.

The teams could come up with a number of concepts — from urban design schemes to proposals for a festival — Wong said. The winning concept will be presented at a public forum and then, along with other ideas that look doable," will be given to government officials in El Paso and Juárez, she said.

Times file photo

Economist and social theorist Richard Florida is author of "The Rise of the Creative Class," a national best-seller first published in 2002.

New Texico initiatives

Six initiatives started by the New Texico Creative Cities Leadership Project:

- **El Paso-Juárez Binational Arts & Cultural District Design Competition:** Open to teams of university students and other nonprofessionals worldwide to come up with concepts for an arts and cultural district stretching along a 30-block area from the El Paso Museum of Art to the Museo Historico in Juárez. The competition is to open Thursday, with entries due May 14. The winning team will get $7,500 and two finalists will get $2,500 each.
- **Border Canvas:** Bring public art project here by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who have drawn international attention with public environmental art projects, or do a big public art project with area artists, possibly using the international bridges, Rio Grande, or mountains.
- **T3 (T cubed) Mentoring Program:** Getting mentors to help people of all ages on both sides of the border with education and personal and professional development.
- **Ecotourism:** To further develop and promote outdoor activities tied to El Paso's mountains, river and other natural features and build an ecotourism structure.
- **Binational Technology Alliance:** Provide enabling tools, training and infrastructure to support the growth of technology-based populations and industries in the region.
- **New Texico network:** Association of people who would provide resources to help people with ideas for innovative businesses or projects to carry them out.

Stephen Ingle, 33, co-founder and art director for Creative Kids, an El Paso art education organization, and a project participant, said, "We have a lot of creative juices flowing (here), but we haven't focused on a lot of initiatives" to showcase El Paso and Juárez. "Austin didn't become Austin until it took advantage of what it had."

Ingle is overseeing the Border Canvas initiative, which, he said, is aimed at using art to "show the tolerance between El Paso and Juárez" and bring an economic boost to the area.

Ingle's committee has sent a proposal to Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who have gained international attention with their environmental art projects, to do a project here, he said. But if that doesn't materialize, the committee wants to get area artists to do some large public art project, perhaps using the international bridges, the Rio Grande or the mountains, Ingle said.

El Paso County Commissioner Veronica Escobar, 37, another project participant, is overseeing its ecotourism initiative.

"My pitch to the group was El Paso has such a great geography and unique environment. Instead of figuring out ways to make this a tourism center through a roller coaster" or other things, "we should build on the assets we have." That includes rock climbing, mountain and street biking, and river and arroyo walks, she said.

Escobar's committee plans to work with organizations already staging recreational and outdoor activities to develop and promote outdoor events and build an ecotourism structure, Escobar said.

Peter Cooper, chief technology officer for the El Paso County government, is heading the project's Binational Technology Alliance. It's focused on identifying and assisting efforts to attract high-tech companies to El Paso, he said.

"I think his (Florida's) theory is part of the (economic development) equation. We need to emphasize our community as being a talented and tolerant community," Cooper said. But traditional economic development efforts also need to continue, he said.

Elizabeth Dahl, executive director of the Children's Miracle Network in El Paso, is heading the project's T3 (T cubed) Mentoring Program initiative, which, she said, is aimed at setting up a mentoring program to help people on both sides of the border with education and personal and professional development.

It's a way to "increase the talent base and retain people in our community," she said.

West-Central city Rep. Susie Byrd is overseeing the project's New Texico network initiative, which, she said in a written statement, may be a "loose association of people in the area" that would connect people with great ideas to the resources needed to carry them out.

"This region breeds great ideas. But a great idea often needs talent and money and time and resources to really make it grow and have an impact," Byrd wrote.

Byrd said she doesn't know whether Florida's theories answer all the questions about how to grow a city's economy, "but I certainly think he is onto something," she wrote. "I think there is a role for the traditional economic development activities, but if we really want to get it done as a city, we need a great Downtown, we need great parks," and other quality of life things, she wrote.

But Florida in his book also notes that attracting creative class workers to a city isn't simply done with "bike trails, music scenes and other amenities.

"Building broad creative ecosystems that mobilize the creative talents of many is a complex, multifaceted activity. We are only beginning to understand how do do it. It will take a long time and many local experiments."

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For more information: www.newtexico.org; www.creativeclass.org

Agenda

The **El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce** will offer a free workshop, Starting Your Business Orientation, 9 a.m. Monday in Suite 109 of the chamber's offices in the Chase Bank Building, 201 E. Main. The monthly cross-table dialogue offers answers to the most pressing questions about business ownership. Participants can get information on business startup, opportunities for growth, lending, procurement, marketing and small-business certifications.

Information: Mary Aldeis, 566-4066, or maldeis@ephcc.org.

The **eWomenNetwork** will conduct its winter workshop from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Monday at the El Paso Club in the Chase Bank Building, 201 E. Main. Participants will set business goals for 2007. Cost: $50.

Information: 799-4812.

The Women's Fund of El Paso invites women to a grant orientation from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Wednesday at the El Paso Community College Valle Verde Campus, 919 Hunter, Building B, Room 240. Grants are available to any qualified El Paso woman seeking money for education and leadership training. The Women's Fund is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for women and girls in the El Paso area. Its grants may be applied to tuition and books for most El Paso educational institutions including technical schools, child care or transportation while attending school, and professional development training.

Information or applications: www.womensfundofelpaso.org or call 532-4673 to reserve a seat.

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