



February 29, 2008

Transformation: the fifth T for creative communities

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Eleven months ago, a small group of Knight Creative Communities Initiative "catalysts" was busily brainstorming about possible economic-development projects to tailor to this community.

It was the first day of our two days of training at Tallahassee Community College, and only four initiatives would be selected on the second day, by vote of all 30 catalysts.

About 10 of us were sitting on the grass outside TCC's Workforce Development Center, taking advantage of a beautiful spring day. In rapid fire, ideas were hatched, discussed, dismissed and deliberated upon. Then Mark O'Bryant, Tallahassee Memorial's president and CEO, interjected.

"What this community really needs," O'Bryant said, "is to become a capital for green technology and business."

Those who know me well can attest that I'm not prone to public displays of emotion. But almost before O'Bryant could get his last word out, I could barely contain myself.

"Yes!" I shouted. "Yes!"

That was the beginning of Greenovation, a yearlong project whose long-range goal was to transform our town into being not only a capital for state government, but also for green technology and business.

Those of us who launched it were ambitious, but not unrealistic. Change like that doesn't happen in a year, even when your efforts are largely successful. Our mission, we decided, was to lay a strong foundation and create the vehicle for sustaining the initiative indefinitely.

I told that story Wednesday night to the Network of Young Professionals, a local organization that expects to be "part of creating Tallahassee's future." My assignment was to discuss Greenovation, which has already passed the baton to the nonprofit corporation we formed called Sustainable Tallahassee.

But I took the liberty to go a little off script. Lots has been documented about our project, so I directed the YPs to where they could learn more about our efforts. They involve recycling, public transportation, urban design, a Web page that will eventually be a "one-stop shop" for going green, and the private, public and nonprofit collaborations and partnerships that we've forged over the past year.

What I really wanted to talk about was transformation, what I called "the fifth T." Urban theorist Richard Florida, whose ideas formed the basis of the KCCI project, identified the four T's essential to a prosperous, creative community: talent, technology, tolerance and territorial assets — a sense of place.

Community transformation is the ultimate goal of the economic-development efforts that catalysts spawned last year. (Besides Greenovation, they included Get Gaines Going, a catalyst for the redevelopment of Gaines Street; the Tallahassee Film Festival, whose exciting debut is in mid-May; and Jump Start Plan X, which hoped to be a vehicle for small-business incubation but didn't jell.)

As I told the YPs, getting involved in any community-improvement effort — through civic organizations, faith congregations, professional associations, whatever — is fundamentally about a desire to transform. Obviously, it stems from the desire to make your community a better place to live and work, but transformation works both ways. In the process of giving back, community activists receive a lot in return.

Transformation, after all, is a powerful elixir whether you're talking about an individual, community, business or nation.

It's the main ingredient in movements that have changed history.

Every religious tradition, for example, counts on the transformative power of its message to change thinking and behavior. The revolutionaries who sought independence from Britain relied on the transformative quality of what surely was considered a harebrained idea — democracy — to defeat the world's greatest military power of the 18th century.

It's the fuel that drives dynamic business people who've completely retooled their operation in the face of conditions that forced them to overhaul or be overwhelmed.

But describing transformation is far easier than doing it, regardless of whether it's personal, professional or political.

I'm not much of an orator, which probably is why I admire powerful speechmaking so much.

My enthusiastic "Yes! Yes!" nearly a year ago would get a lousy grade in a public-speaking class. But to the extent that it helped ignite other catalysts' transformative sense of possibility, I dare say mission accomplished.