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'Cool Cities' conferees sport sunglasses

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By DANIEL STURM

It was the first freezing winter day when 1,400 art coordinators, planners and neighborhood activists gathered at the Lansing Center last week to brainstorm how to create cool cities.

Inside, though, the conferees were wearing orange and black "cool cities" sunglasses, as if to signify that Michigan could be as sunny as Florida. The logic seemed a little off. We are, after all, a chilly state. Perhaps a pair of neon earmuffs would have been better suited.

But then again, it wasn't without a sense of irony that the conference's guest speaker was an economist named Richard Florida, who has written a book the state government, which sponsored the conference on Thursday, is using as its bible: "The Rise of the Creative Class."

The book's appeal to young urban professionals seems to match Gov. Jennifer Granholm's goal to retrofit Michigan cities so they can attract and retain a skilled workforce. Florida has created a "creativity index," which compares the potential of metropolitan areas to attract professionals. In Florida's study the Greater Lansing area ranks seventh out of 63 regions, with 250,000 to 500,000 residents.

But these figures contrast with a recent survey of Cooley Law School students, in which only 3.9 percent named Lansing as an example of a "cool city." They pointed to Ann Arbor or Grand Rapids as places that took urban revitalization more seriously. All Michigan cities with populations greater than 100,000 have lost population within the last two years, except Ann Arbor and Sterling Heights. Between 1980 and 2000, Lansing lost 8.5 percent.

David Wiener, Lansing's representative for the cool cities initiative, believes that land use is part of the reason Lansing is considered less attractive. After returning from a weekend trip to Ann Arbor, the executive assistant to Mayor Tony Benavides said that he realized how much more concentrated Ann Arbor is. "We started at the Farmer's Market, then we walked around, and ended up going to a vegetarian restaurant," he said, "Finally we went to another restaurant, and after that we went to a jazz bar. It's all right there, all in walking distance. We don't have that in Lansing."

There are "a lot of cool things in Lansing," Wiener said, "but they are not concentrated in one place. You have to go to East Lansing for some things, to Old Town for some things, or to the west side. They're spread all over." The key question, he said, is how Lansing can overcome this lack of concentration and make its hidden beauty more visible

without having to spend much money.

How to redesign neighborhoods and adopt a more thoughtful approach to planning was a central theme of the conference. Gene Townsend, an environmental-minded Lansing builder, told me many construction projects in Lansing were conducted with the interests of developers and government workers in mind, but not with the interests of the residents.

In one of the conference's 18 workshops, attendees were taken on a photo tour of Michigan cities that have redesigned their downtown areas. In their presentation, titled "Design Tools for Improving Downtown," Jack Williamson, founder of the Community Design Advisory Program in Bloomfield Hills, and Jeffry Corbin, founder of Corbin Design in Traverse City, argued that cities are often flooded with visual information, such as traffic signs, awnings, billboards and store signs. "Often you can't find what you are looking for," Williamson said. The landscape architect suggested reducing the amounts of signage, and removing signs from the sides of buildings, and from above the roofline.

Williamson said it's important to direct drivers' eyes toward blocks. He suggests repainting the sides of freestanding or corner buildings in the same color, to increase a sense of mass and volume. Following simple aesthetic guidelines can be cost effective, help create harmony and overcome the appearance of dilapidation and urban sprawl. Corbin suggested using "cooler" colors such as blue or gray on west- and south-facing blocks, which are more exposed to the sun, and warmer colors such as red or brown, on the more shaded, north- and east-facing blocks.

Corbin also emphasized the importance of creating a more pedestrian-friendly streetscape. He showed examples of a neighborhood commercial district in Rochester Hills that was transformed into a more walkable and green neighborhood. "The difficulty is when there are large structures and spaces between the buildings that don't really operate as part of an identifiable commercial district," Corbin said. He suggested planting trees.

The designer pointed out that Michigan cities frequently suffer from five-lane state highways crossing their downtown areas, making the creation of a more walkable community impossible. In Howell, for instance, he suggested implementing a system for pedestrian movement at intersections similar to the one used in Denver, in which all traffic stops for 45 seconds every three minutes. "As a result it's quiet, and you can cross the street, you can walk diagonal, or even dance." Corbin said Michigan's Department of Transportation has never adopted a pedestrian-friendly traffic system. "It would be interesting to give it a try."

At the end of a nine-hour, workshop-packed day, several participants said they felt inspired by Granholm's initiative and confident that they could quickly implement some of the proposed action steps.

Former Lansing Mayor David Hollister, director of Michigan's Department of Labor and Economic Growth, asked members of the 120 Michigan communities to assemble in regional groups.

At table number 120, Wiener pulled out a pen to take notes. "What's missing in our community?" he asked the conference participants gathered around his table.

Don LeDuc, president of Cooley Law School, proposed offering incentives for state employees to spend their evenings downtown. "Every state employee would get 10 percent off on Tuesday nights," he said.

Marge Bossenberry, a Capital Area District Library board member, said that extending the hours of downtown businesses would be the most effective tool to draw more people. As a result of being open later at the Silver Bells evening event, the library drew an extra 1,200 people to its downtown branch, she said. The board was so encouraged that it decided to keep the downtown library open an hour later beginning Jan. 2. (The new hours will be 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday.)

Wiener said he would not suggest the creation of yet another Blue Ribbon Committee, however. "There's so much energy flowing, I think we need to let the bubbles come out," he said, adding that the city has no additional project money to spend due to current budget problems.

A group of younger conference participants came to a similar conclusion. Kevin Heuer, a local Americorps program coordinator, said Lansing lacks a community center that offers films, live music, and cuisine. Heuer said he has

recently begun to develop a concept for an independent movie theater in downtown Lansing and is looking for funding sources.

Ron Whitmore, director of the Northwest Lansing Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative, pointed out that the negative image of downtown Lansing no longer matches the reality. Currently, more than a dozen restaurants and half a dozen shops are open after 5 p.m. and on weekends (see info box on Page 6).

Jessica Yorko, a Michigan Department for Environmental Quality worker, said that downtown Lansing should consider offering more festivals. Yorko attended a workshop in which Marquette representatives explained how it was able to use this strategy to fill its streets and shops with people. "What I got out of that talk was: ☐Have a lot of good parties!"

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