Uniqueness attracts the creative class

By John Fleming

Next time you shoot a game of billiards at The Warehouse on Gaines Street, tip your bartender a few extra bucks. After all, he's helping boost economic development in Tallahassee.

This was my thought after looking over the ideas behind the Knight Creative Communities Initiative, an experiment in economic strategy inspired by Richard Florida's best-selling "The Rise of the Creative Class." Tallahassee has a $585,000 grant from the initiative for a two-year project to assemble local thinkers and let them mull over some ways to attract more young creative types to town.

The young people in this creative class, the reasoning goes, provide the brainpower needed to drive profitability in 21st-century America's corporations. Companies are willing to pay these young creators gobs of money, and will go to great lengths to employ them. If you have a city that is particularly appealing for these intellectual rock stars, then you're going to have all sorts of economic advantages over the rest of the stodgy cities.

Agree or disagree, this is a valuable insight that helps explain why otherwise unremarkable cities like Austin, Texas, have attained an aura of cool prosperity. Austin also has several disc golf courses . . . but more on that later.

First, let's talk about The Warehouse, that venerable anchor of Gaines Street.

Florida says authenticity, which loosely means a sense of uniqueness, is part of what attracts the creative class. You see it in things like historic buildings, renovated warehouse
districts, old neighborhoods, and great music scenes.

Reading this reminded me of a conversation I had a few years ago with someone who had recently moved to Tallahassee. She was young and stylish enough to have owned an iPod before most people would have recognized one, and squarely in the creative class.

The question she posed over a game of pool at The Warehouse was: Why are all of Tallahassee's bars and restaurants in strip malls?

It's true, a lot of them are. Florida might point out that in the eyes of the creative class, strip malls and chain restaurants are stamped from cookie cutters, and aren't authentic.

The Warehouse, on the other hand, is a one-of-a-kind place treasured by locals and rediscovered annually by discerning newcomers. Its hardwood floors, high rafters, dusty corners and erudite bathroom graffiti are all markers of the harmlessly seedy authenticity that attracts the creative class.

The Warehouse is also known for attracting a very diverse crowd, and that's another reason why it aligns with what Florida believes: A lot of very creative people grow up feeling like outsiders, and they seek places that are tolerant of diversity.

Tallahassee has fostered its share of outsiders, but its progressive tendencies have always been balanced by a more buttoned-down contingent, salted with more than a few “squelchers.” Squelcher is a term that Florida appropriates to refer to people who sap creative energy by building roadblocks to change.

Unfortunately, there may be a squelchy tendency in Tallahassee that we have to work to overcome.

Several years ago, for example, I interviewed a young Parks and Recreation staffer responsible for creating the disc golf course at Tom Brown Park. I was pretty happy about the new course, because I'd just moved from Gainesville, which had not one, but two disc golf courses.

It was a perfect location, and installing the course was probably a lot cheaper than a new tennis court, but the impression I got was that it had been a tough sell. Even after he got the go-ahead, it still took the city several months to finish the course.

Austin, I should mention, has at least six disc golf courses, five of which are maintained by the city. It's not a stretch to suggest that great disc golf courses - along with great nightclubs, great DJs, and great mountain bike trails - are something that we should nurture if we're serious about turning Tallahassee into a haven for the creative class.

Maybe some of the $585,000 from the Knight initiative should go to a couple more disc golf courses, which are pretty cheap to build.

Better yet, spend a few dollars on a couple games of pool and some quarters for the jukebox at The Warehouse.
Loosen up, get a good conversation started, and I'm optimistic that we'll make some progress.

And don't forget to tip your bartender.

John Fleming is a public relations consultant at Herrle Communications Group. He is now too old to be a member of the creative class, but he still tosses a disc at Tom Brown Park from time to time. Contact him at johnnpr@yahoo.com.