

# embracing creativity

By Slater Barr, CEcD



Carrollton Cultural Arts Center includes an art gallery with rotating exhibits, four arts classrooms, a 260-seat theatre, and rehearsal spaces

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## CONTEXT

Carrollton, Georgia, is a city of approximately 23,000 located 49 miles southwest of Atlanta, Georgia. In the late 90's, community leaders faced major challenges. The community's historically strong manufacturing base was starting to erode. Calculations showed that the area suffered a net loss of almost 1,200 jobs in the industrial sector from 1997 to 2001. Although the community was losing key jobs, it simultaneously faced serious residential growth pressures as Atlanta's growth turned an eye towards the west. In fact, from 2001 to 2006, Carroll County was listed by the U.S. Census

Bureau as one of the 100 fastest growing counties in the nation.

Astute local leadership foresaw a potentially devastating scenario. Two prominent business leaders, concerned about local economic trends and their impact upon both their businesses and their community, led efforts to revitalize Carroll County. Specifically, Loy Howard, CEO of Tanner Health System, and Roy Richards, Jr., chairman of Southwire Corporation, discussed the very real possibility of a shrinking local job and tax base coupled with increasing demands for community services due to rapid residential growth. Since much of the residential development was due to markets created by Atlanta's sprawl marching to the west, many of the new homes were priced in a range insufficient to generate enough tax revenues to compensate local governments for the cost of services provided to the new households.

This concern was verified by a 2002 study, "Service Costs and Revenue Streams of Different Land Uses in Carroll County, Georgia" by Dr. Jeffrey Dorfman of the University of Georgia. In it, he states,

...the break-even home value for Carroll County [is] \$122,000 (the average home value in 2001 was \$120,000) ... While the county government breaks-even on a \$122,000 [home], they are just one government entity in the county. From the school system perspective, the results are quite different. If a home contains just one child attending the public schools, the break-even home value jumps to \$184,000 (from the point of view of the schools' budget). Thus, the county government will be earning a fiscal surplus off a house with a single child long before the schools. With two kids in school, the break-even home price increases to \$331,000. For three and four children in a household, the break-even

## AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

An inclusive, broad-based planning process in Carrollton, Georgia, addressed community problems holistically, recognizing the interplay among social, economic, and environmental issues. Although the plan wasn't designed around "creative class" strategies, the inclusive nature of the process engaged and empowered the community's existing creative class workers. As they worked to plan the type of community that they desired, by default they helped create a community attractive to their peers, other members of the creative class. Involving the creative class in the creative process of planning a better community is, in itself, an amenity that nurtures their attraction and commitment to a place.

prices rise to levels far above the home prices in all but the most exclusive community.<sup>1</sup>

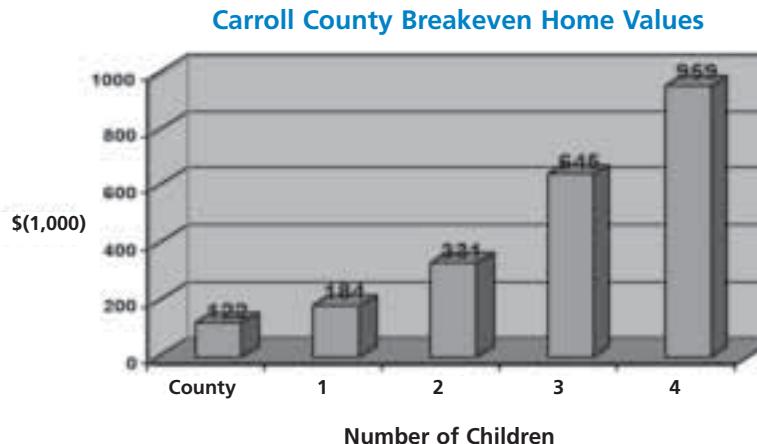
Howard and Richards organized a small group of government and business leaders, who agreed to fund a strategic planning process to address the pending crisis. Market Street Services, a leading economic and community development consulting firm based in Atlanta, Georgia, was hired to analyze and define community issues, followed by facilitation of the community's own strategic plan. The community analysis consisted of an economic and demographic profile, a business climate analysis, focus groups and surveys to measure community perceptions, and research on target business clusters. The conclusion of the study's demographic and economic analysis stated,

The findings of this research identify several challenges facing Carroll County. Low levels of wealth creation in Carroll County are foremost among these. The per capita income – one of the most direct indicators of wealth creation and overall economic strength – in Carroll County is below the benchmark communities, state and national levels. This limited wealth creation is a function of the occupational structure, the local business mix, and the low educational attainment levels of residents.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately 300 volunteers, representing a broad cross-section of the community, participated in the subsequent planning process over a one-year period. Representatives of various stakeholder groups, interested in specific aspects of the plan, were identified and asked to serve on committees appropriate to their interests. The spectrum of issues addressed in the plan was equally broad and inclusive. Committees were organized into five key areas of focus or goals: (1) A Stronger Economy, (2) Quality Workforce & Education, (3) Enhancing the Quality of Life, (4) Planning & Infrastructure Development, and (5) Local Government & Leadership.

The resulting strategic plan became known as the Carroll Tomorrow Economic Development Strategy and included 37 objectives with 239 action items. After some deliberation, the community decided to create a new 501(c)(3) public/private partnership to oversee the plan, encourage others to take direct action on the various items, and to track their success or failure. This new entity assumed

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the name of the strategic plan and became known as Carroll Tomorrow. Staff for the new organization was hired in 2001 and a prioritized version of the overall strategic plan was unveiled in early 2002.

### CREATIVE CLASS STRATEGIES

Later in 2002, economic development circles were buzzing with the publication of Richard Florida's treatise on *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Dr. Florida's research explored the importance of the "creative class" – people who added value to their products by the application of their intellect and creativity. His definition crossed traditional segmentation of occupations and included highly creative occupations ranging from entrepreneurs and business management to science and engineering, from arts and design to architecture and entertainment fields.

Dr. Florida's compelling arguments had many economic developers declaring that the "era of smokestack chasing is over; the creative class analysis suggests that chasing talent is a viable alternative for sparking local growth."<sup>3</sup> According to US Department of Agriculture researchers McGranahan and Wojan,

The geographic mobility of the creative class is central to Florida's thesis. He argues that people in these occupations tend to seek a high quality of life as well as rewarding work, and they are drawn to cities with cultural diversity, active street scenes, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Good local universities alone will not lead to local economic dynamism as graduates may move to more attractive places upon obtaining their degrees. In this context, the key to local growth is to attract and retain talent, as talent leads to further job creation.<sup>4</sup>

However, Dr. Florida's work concentrated on urban areas with high concentrations of young, "hip", creative class workers. Only recently have researchers started examining the potential for cre-

ative class strategies in more rural communities. Again, referencing McGranahan and Wojan,

The creative-class analysis suggests that rural growth depends greatly on the attractiveness of rural communities, their landscapes, and their climates... Despite an urban affinity, the creative class – perhaps more able and apt than others in the workforce to choose where to live based on quality-of-life considerations – can be drawn out of cities to high-amenity rural locations.<sup>5</sup>

### CREATIVE BY NATURE, IF NOT DESIGN

The inclusive nature of the public input into the Carroll Tomorrow Economic Development Strategy created a very broad, balanced approach to improving the entire community, rather than dealing with individual issues in isolation. Although the plan was developed slightly before the publication of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, many of the objectives and action items directly addressed the amenities required to attract creative class workers. Furthermore, the planning process engaged and empowered the creative class workers already existing in the area to become directly involved in creating the type of community that they desired. In short, although the plan was not directly designed to attract creative class workers, the plan's focus on building a better community, not just a better economy, naturally included many elements common to creative class strategies.



Filming "Conjurer" took place in several locations in Carroll County

For example, under Goal 1: A Stronger Economy, the strategy lists the objective of "Promote entrepreneurial development and the expansion of small businesses," with the action step "Secure funds and partners to jointly operate a business incubator focused on new businesses and technology start-ups." Goal 2: Enhancing the Quality of Life, includes the objective of "Promote the development of more local cultural activities and facilities, special events, and diverse entertainment venues" with the action steps "Support the development of the

Carrollton Cultural Arts Center in downtown" and "Expand the role of the Carroll County Cultural Arts Alliance." Similar action items throughout the plan address zoning and design standards, green-space preservation, and the development of a greenbelt, among many others.

### WORKING THE PLAN

From 2002 through 2007, Carroll Tomorrow staff and volunteers focused on achieving each of the action steps in the strategic plan. Significant progress was made on most, but not all, of the items in the plan. Other worthwhile initiatives, not directly associated with the plan, gained momentum due to the interrelationships among all of the economic and social issues.

The city of Carrollton, through its Main Street Program, aided efforts by local developers to revitalize Adamson Square, center of the historic business district. With a \$1.2 million streetscape, mainly funded through a TEA-21 grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation, redevelopment of this area accelerated. Adamson Square soon became an exciting, vibrant mix of restaurants,

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shops, and offices. Galleries and studios have located just off the Square. The city's continued commitment to this area is further evidenced by the construction currently underway of a new parking garage to alleviate shortages of available parking.

Another city project was the Carrollton Cultural Arts Center, which includes an art gallery with rotating exhibits, four arts classrooms, a 260-seat theatre, and rehearsal spaces. Located adjacent to Adamson Square, the Cultural Arts Center maintains a busy schedule of performances, exhibits, and classes for the community. Here, investment in a facility directly led to the attraction of creative class talent. Today, the Carrollton Artist Guild touts over 200 artists as members.

As already stated, the creative class embodies far more than artists. Few endeavors require more cre-

activity than starting a new business. As previously mentioned, one of the strategic plan's action steps required the creation of a small business incubator to nurture those daring entrepreneurs. That action step became a reality through the generous donation by a local physician and entrepreneur, Dr. John Burson, of a 24,000 sq. ft. building. Carroll Tomorrow solicited grants from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration, the Appalachian Regional Commission, OneGeorgia Authority, the city of Carrollton, and the Development Authority of Carroll County. In all, \$1.6 million was raised to renovate and furnish the new incubator.

The Burson Center mixed-use incubator opened in July of 2006. Today the facility is fully occupied and Carroll Tomorrow has started planning an expansion. Calculations show that, after just one year of operation, the incubator is servicing 23 tenant clients, creating 51 jobs with an average salary of \$26,000, with direct capital investment of over \$2.5 million.

Often, attracting super-creative personalities, particularly those with an entrepreneurial bent, leads to new business creation and the attraction of other creative occupations. Such was the case of entrepreneur Richard Mix and his selection of Carroll County as his home in 2001. Mix says, "At the time, my wife and I were constantly traveling. We were primarily looking for a location that had quick access to Hartsfield International Airport and Atlanta's amenities, but we also wanted a great quality-of-life in a more rural setting. The thing that impressed me about Carrollton was that it wasn't a stale community. It was obviously very progressive and was moving forward with a plan and a purpose."

In addition to being one of the world's foremost experts in Coca-Cola bottle collectibles, Mix had served as executive producer of the independent film "Terror Tract" back in 2000. He dreamed of bringing the film industry to his new home and initiated several discussions about the potential of film production in Carrollton. His encouragement led Carroll Tomorrow to open the Carroll Tomorrow Film Office to promote Carroll County as a location for the film industry.

In 2007, his persistence paid off, as he partnered with Red Five Entertainment from Los Angeles to film the psychological thriller "Conjurer" in Carrollton. The film headquartered in The Burson Center and starred Andrew Bowen (MAD TV, ER, The Work and the Glory), Maxine Bahns (Steam, Driving Me Crazy), and John Schneider (Dukes of Hazzard, Smallville). Carroll Tomorrow took an



*The Burson Center incubator*

equity position in the film in lieu of rent at The Burson Center incubator. Filming took place in several locations in Carroll County with the main story set at an old farmhouse in Whitesburg, Georgia.

The movie generated a tremendous amount of publicity for the incubator and for the viability of film production as a new industry. One local businessman, Randy Simpkins, was so impressed with the filmmakers' business model, potential rate of return on investment, and quality of product, that he approached Red Five Entertainment about becoming a business partner. After negotiations, the deal was struck and Red Five Entertainment relocated its offices to Carrollton. Now, Red Five is working on its next film project, to begin shooting in summer, 2008.

### **BUT IS IT WORKING?**

These examples provide anecdotal evidence, at best, to support our contention that consistent, systematic focus on a strategic plan generated by a broad-based group of community leaders can improve a rural community's attractiveness to the "Creative Class." Conventional methods of measuring economic development demonstrate success in recruitment and expansion. Since 2001, Carroll Tomorrow's projects have resulted in over 2,000 direct jobs, almost \$350 million in new capital investment, over \$6 million in grants, and a Net Present Value calculation of over \$12.5 million in additional tax revenues. However, these figures don't directly reflect any measurement of an improved ability to attract creative class workers to the community.

Census data does show that, over the period 2000 to 2006, Carroll County's population grew 34.4 percent in the 25-34 age group compared to 5.9 percent for the Atlanta MSA, 3.0 percent for Georgia, and 0.0 percent for the United States. For the 35-44 age group, Carroll County's population increased by 17.9 percent compared to 19.9 per-

### Percent Change in Population by Age Group 2000-2006

	Carroll County	Atlanta MSA	Georgia	United States
Under 17	21.2%	25.0%	13.0%	2.0%
18-24	11.4%	17.2%	12.6%	9.4%
25-34	34.4%	5.9%	3.0%	0.0%
35-44	17.9%	19.9%	8.8%	-2.8%
45-64	29.3%	46.3%	29.2%	21.0%
65 & older	20.2%	30.9%	15.5%	6.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, compiled by Market Street Services

cent for the Atlanta MSA, 8.8 percent for Georgia, and a negative 2.8 percent for the United States.

Finally, an examination of a few key creative class job categories shows significant growth over the last few years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 2004-2007, "Information" grew by 22 percent; "Finance and Insurance" by 22 percent; "Professional and Technical Services" by 33 percent; and "Arts, Entertainment and Recreation" by 54 percent. This compares to a total job growth over the same period of 15 percent.

#### WHAT'S NEXT?

The community continues to work on the remaining steps from the 2002 plan. Progress can be seen across the entire breadth of issues addressed in the plan. However, several issues have proven particularly "sticky" and difficult to solve. Substantial increases in per capita income remain elusive, teen pregnancy rates are still high, and school drop-out rates are unacceptable. Yet, progress is being made, even in these more difficult areas, and the community's commitment to the plan and planning process remains strong. Currently, several new initiatives are under development that should prove particularly attractive to creative class workers.

Carroll Tomorrow plans to expand The Burson Center small business incubator with a particular focus on the music, film and video industry. We feel that the right combination of facilities and services could be particularly attractive to independent film producers. A 2006 Motion Picture Association of America report shows that approximately 85 percent of these firms employ fewer than 10 people, meaning that the motion picture and television production industry is largely entrepreneurial.<sup>6</sup>

Technological changes are improving the prospects for independents with lower production costs and access to far more distribution channels. The "Hollywood model" of assembling teams of independent employees/companies for a brief period to produce a product seems well-suited to the incubator environment.

The University of West Georgia, with over 10,000 students, is a major economic engine in Carrollton's economy. Projections show extraordinary growth fueled by metro Atlanta's population growth and demographic age projections. With limited space on campus to accommodate this growth and in recognition of the importance of the university to the local economy, the city of Carrollton has donated over 200 acres of land adjacent to campus to relocate intramural fields, sports facilities, etc. to free up space on the main campus for academic needs. In addition, athletic boosters and the community are raising funds to construct a new football stadium on the donated acreage.

Although the university features a very attractive campus, much of the surrounding commercial area has less attractive strip centers, auto repair shops, and fast food restaurants. A Carroll Tomorrow sponsored committee is hard at work examining the possibility of creating an Arts & Entertainment District linking the university with the excitement of downtown's Adamson Square.

According to committee chairman Woody Cole, "I truly believe that our efforts will transform the Maple Street corridor into an exciting, vibrant mix of restaurants, coffee shops, art studios, galleries, and boutiques. This committee has a unique opportunity to assist with the growth of one of our largest economic engines, the University of West Georgia. Not only will our work create the appropriate environment surrounding a prestigious university campus, the resulting higher quality-of-life benefits us all. Whether it is the university attracting students or faculty, Tanner recruiting new doctors, or Southwire seeking to hire executive talent – everyone gains as we improve the appearance and function of our community."

The city of Carrollton continues to be a major ally in these efforts as it adds to the area with the Carrollton greenbelt, creating a 12-foot-wide bicycle trail surrounded by greenspace through this area and, ultimately, around the entire city. Discussions are also underway about the creation of a business park near the university, oriented towards technology-driven industries.

Finally, with many of the action steps completed from the original strategic plan, Carroll Tomorrow has again engaged Market Street Services to assist with developing a new, community-driven strategic plan, building upon the success of the original. As before, the organization will stress inclusiveness and broad participation.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This story exemplifies the quote by noted anthropologist Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." For Carroll County, two committed community leaders, Loy Howard and Roy Richards, Jr., put into place a process that emphasized inclusion, strategic planning based upon detailed analysis, and a deep belief that community issues must not be addressed in isolation. A holistic approach must be pursued.

The process shows that, if you can bring together a broad cross-section of a community's existing creative class and empower them to build the type of community in which they wish to live, you will by default create a place attractive to other creative class workers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this process must be nurtured and sustained, year after year, until it becomes an integral part of your community's culture. The article has already discussed the geographic mobility of the creative class and the importance of a high-amenity lifestyle. Perhaps the greatest amenity that most cities can offer to their creative class residents is simply to include them in the process of "creating" their own community – physically, as well as socially. 

## ENDNOTES

1. Dorfman, Jeffrey H. and Black, Dawn, "Service Costs and Revenue Streams of Different Land Uses in Carroll County, Georgia: The Economic Costs of Development for Local Governments", August 2002
2. Market Street Services, Inc., "Carroll Tomorrow Demographic & Economic Analysis", September 13, 1999
3. McGranahan, David A. and Wojan, Timothy R., "The Creative Class, A Key to Rural Growth", Amber Waves magazine, April 2007
4. ibid.
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6. MPAA Strategic Planning & Research, "The Economic Impact of the Motion Picture and Television Industry on the United States, 2006 Report", January 2007



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