

TACOMA'S CREATIVE STREAK

BY TODD MATTHEWS

When you think of Tacoma, do you think of a place for creativity?

Downtown's cluster of major museums seems designed for artgoers. You can always catch an art-house film at the independent Grand Cinema. If you need to coax your creativity a bit, you could always tip back a pint of beer at Tacoma's own Harmon Brewery.

But is Tacoma a place for the so-called 'creative class' of young professionals? Four years ago, the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber of Commerce Foundation set out to answer that question affirmatively, through an effort known as Creative Tacoma. The goal? Reshape the city so it caters to the 'creative class,' a term coined by economic development expert Dr. Richard Florida.

According to Florida, businesses today are choosing where to locate -- not based on incentive packages -- but because the area offers the talent they need to compete successfully in a global environment. To grow and prosper, adds Florida, a city must have a high concentration of "creative workers" in a variety of fields -- technology, research and design, arts and culture, and professional and managerial occupations -- and provide opportunities for education and training for this creative class of workers.

In early-2006, Florida was invited to speak at the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber's annual meeting. The visit had a

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profound impact on the Chamber long after Florida departed.

A group was formed to launch a pilot project that would attempt to grow a creative class in Tacoma. Florida returned to Tacoma to to teach a two-day seminar, which spurred the Creative Cities Leadership Project (CCLP) -- the first of its kind in any U.S. city

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Did it work? One CCLP team focused on fostering local talent at a young age. The Vision Center at Church of the Living God in Tacoma worked with the national organization INROADS to connect area youth with internship opportunities. Another CCLP team compiled extensive research on the feasibility of an arts incubator in Tacoma. And another team focused on something practical and creative in its own right -- a map of the Hilltop neighborhood that showcased 13 ethnic restaurants, neighborhood bars and small-food businesses that might appeal to young professionals.

But CCLP's two biggest achievements are still thriving today. The first is Love Tacoma, a grassroots effort aimed to create a fun environment for young professionals and creative types who are already here or considering a job opportunity in Tacoma. In this economy, a steady pay check is great. But what is there to do after work?

That's where Love Tacoma fits. More than 500 people have signed up through the Love Tacoma Web site to receive announcements on upcoming events. The group tapped the resources of some local businesses who already employed young creative types. Rusty George Design stepped forward and built a Web site for free. BCRA Design contributed free services to create a logo for the group; and Print NW offered to produce cards and flyers for free.

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Its inaugural event was held in the summer of 2007 with an event called "Chill at Pacific Grill." More than 150 people flocked to the downtown bar and restaurant for cocktails and socializing. By evening's end, the group had traction. Since then, Love Tacoma has hosted the "Hipster Boutique Tour," which gathered 15 young women for a walking tour of downtown Tacoma's small-business clothiers. "Swiss Kiss" was held at a pub near the University of Washington Tacoma downtown campus; the pub's owner provided free appetizers and created three signature cocktails for Love Tacoma attendees. The "MLK Nosh" sent Love Tacomans on a dining crawl of the restaurants and bars on Martin Luther King, Jr. Way in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood. And there was the "Feed Your Head" night, with browsing at King's Books, and a trivia contest at Doyle's pub.

Today, a planning group meets monthly to keep Love Tacoma alive. "Our intent is to create social networking opportunities for people in Tacoma," says Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber Metropolitan Development Director Chelsea Levy, a member of the planning group. At press time, the group planned June's event at the Tacoma Art Museum, Workz Cafe as part of the Third Thursday art walk; hello, cupcake downtown was on board to provide cupcakes. In July, the group will meet at Primo Grill in the city's bustling Sixth Avenue Business District. In August, the group will meet at Katie Downs on Ruston Way's waterfront. And a "Link and Drink" pub crawl of downtown bars and restaurants located along the Link light rail line is tentatively planned for a Love Tacoma Extra in August.

"Love Tacoma is a great brand," says Levy. "It's something that people who live in Tacoma can really relate to. The group has evolved over time and has worked to maintain the philosophy of meeting new people and going to new and different places in Tacoma."

The second successful outcome of the Creative Cities initiative that is still active today can be traced to CCLP's "Green Tacoma" team and its goal to create a "Green Alliance" of local merchants that would support, promote and build awareness for environmentally friendly businesses and organizations that offer green products and services. The thinking was this: If Tacoma could be known as a hub for green products and services, it would foster the energy

to draw cutting-edge businesses that would appeal to the creative class of workers. "Green Tacoma" has evolved into TacomaACTS, a business alliance that works to expand the region's green economy through encouraging and supporting sustainable business development and advocating for the green business sector.

Its goal is to make Tacoma-Pierce County a leader in economic growth and support a green economy. TacomaACTS sustainable business certification program has helped monitor business's carbon footprints through a calculator designed specifically for Pierce County by TacomaACTS and Cascadia Consulting. Quarterly reports and follow-up interviews will culminate in a report, and customized recommendations for cost-saving GHG reductions will be provided to each represented business. TacomaACTS has also partnered with WorkForce Central and Dr. Alan Hardcastle of Washington State University on a study of sustainable economy initiatives.

In June, TacomaACTS hosted "Green Drinks," a regular social networking event similar to Love Tacoma and for people who work in the environmental field. Green Drinkers enjoyed Fish Tale Organic Amber Ale and met TacomaACTS' new Executive Director, Stephanie Gowing who started on May 17

Through these two programs -- Love Tacoma and TacomaACTS -- the Chamber hopes to keep Tacoma's creative streak alive. ←

