

The young, the restless and the green with Joe Cortright

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Nikki Pike is 29 years old, a world traveler, an artist and builder and conservationist — and she can't wait to get the hell out of Tampa Bay.

Not that Pike takes any great pleasure in her desire to flee. It's just that this community doesn't offer her much of a future, either for work or for play, once she completes her master's degree from USF's Fine Arts program.

"I actually have an exit strategy for Tampa," Pike said. "In eight months, I'm out of here. I graduate"

Pike made this admission in front of about 200 people gathered to listen to [Portland economist Joe Cortright](#) deliver his third wave of data about how Tampa Bay could be better than it is. Pike could have stepped straight out of the pages of his first study, "[Young and Restless](#)," which examined how poorly Tampa Bay is attracting and keeping educated young professionals and creatives, especially college-educated women such as Pike. She'd like to see Tampa Bay takes Cortright's advice, or at least learn from his three data studies, and make a more vibrant, diverse economy with lots of job, housing and entertainment choices.

Her question to Cortright ("What can an individual do?") was a painful reminder of how much work remains to turn around a prevailing tide of mediocrity and complacency that seems to dominate much of the public discourse.

Cortright didn't have an answer. Only the people in this room can tell you that, he said. The composition of people in the room also was alternately exciting and depressing: lots of people with cool ideas who are just below the ruling class, but very few decision-makers who could take Cortright's ideas and turn them into reality. Two Hillsborough County Commissioners (Jim Norman and Ken Hagan) were there; only John Dingfelder attended from Tampa City Council; no Mayor Iorio, no Mayor Baker.

Cortright's report this time dealt with the "[green dividend](#)" that cities can realize by making environmentally friendly public decisions. Studies disprove the old saw that saving the environment is devastating to the local economy, he told the [Creative Tampa Bay](#) audience. By his calculations, Portland saves \$2.6 billion a year through a combination of transit systems and land-use plans that promote more housing choices closer to jobs. Those savings stay in Portland and are spent on local businesses (such as restaurants) instead of flying out of that region to Detroit (to pay for new cars) and Saudi Arabia (for oil).

Using his same formula, Tampa Bay could inject a saved \$1.8 billion into the local economy if it cut the average time commuters spend in cars each day from 28 miles to the national average of almost 25. That doesn't include the value of increased productivity or the value of something more important — happiness.

But Cortright added that the process of changing government and individual decision isn't easy and can take decades. "There isn't a silver bullet out there," he said.

As if to remind us of the need for a silver bullet, transit opponent Jim Norman chimed in that Cortright was relating only the savings side of the equation. What about the cost of building rail, and the decades of supporting it? Cortright didn't know those numbers for Tampa Bay but said in

Portland, it was a no-brainer, that the annual savings far eclipsed the \$1 billion or so that the rail system cost to build.

Pike got to see the hope and promise for Tampa Bay butt right up against its political realities. She hopes the region can transcend its past, even as she looks for other places to live, such as Portland. For now, however, she's not going to go away without saying something about it. "I'm here," Pike said, "and I'm trying."