

A green approach can pay off in green

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Portland-based economist Joe Cortright came to Tampa on Tuesday to tell a Creative Tampa Bay audience how going green can mean big bucks.

In the process, however, he had some folks wondering if our area can ever achieve the kind of environmentally friendly urban core he enjoys in Portland, Ore.

Cortright shared how Portland's 20-year focus on transportation alternatives and smart growth have resulted in an annual income savings of \$1.1-billion for Portland residents. Residents reinvest those funds in the local economy, fueling a boom in restaurants and other businesses.

While it wouldn't be easy, he said, the Tampa Bay area could realize a similar economic boost.

But the best was yet to come. University of South Florida student Nikki Pike stood during the Q&A session at the Hyatt Regency and essentially said her disappointment in Tampa has prompted her to create an exit strategy that includes Portland as a possibility.

A low murmur of disapproval filled the room. Someone said under his breath, "You're leaving? Good."

Longtime residents grow weary of hearing what's wrong with our area and what's right with everywhere else. Even I fall into that trap. But we must resist the temptation to be dismissive.

As Cortright explained, with baby boomers moving into retirement, cities will have to compete to retain talent from a smaller work pool. His research shows workers will choose where to live based on the quality of life, not career pursuits.

Today's young work force can create the kind of momentum needed to bring about the changes necessary to create a green dividend. I think it's an achievable goal.

Here's Cortright's argument. Vehicle travel in the Tampa Bay area averages 28 miles per person per day. If we could reduce that number to the national average for metropolitan areas - 24.3 miles per person per day - Tampa Bay residents would have \$1.8-billion to pump into the economy.

There is no magic bullet - or bullet train - to achieve this. Political and civic leaders must create the will. Yes, you have to put costly transit improvements in the mix, but higher density and greater housing price ranges in our urban areas can prove beneficial. Greater accessibility for walkers and bicyclists would serve as an additional asset.

We don't necessarily need 150 miles of light rail to affect the system. Even in Portland, which has a marvelous public transit system, only 13 percent of the residents commute by mass transit.

Again, we're talking about reducing the per-person average by less than 4 miles. Cortright said it's not a matter of convincing folks to give up their cars. It's a matter of getting people not to drive as far or as often.

Plus, going green would make this area more appealing to the young work force. The area must address other challenges that discourage the next generation. They no longer accept being "paid in sunshine," and increased diversity would help.

But a more environmentally friendly city would be a good start.

It's young people who need to help start it.

The bottom line is we need people like Pike. Portland is doing fine without you. Stay and help us get to the next level.

That's all I'm saying.