

Taking the superhighway

Technology is transforming all aspects of community

by Jeremy Nowak

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Today it is hard to pick up a magazine or newspaper without reading about the dramatic changes brought about through technology. Behind the hype about the New Economy, technological change is transforming all aspects of economic production and distribution. These changes are now apparent in every aspect of our lives: how we shop, learn, work and communicate.

As in the past, technological change affects the core issues of human geography and community. The organization and function of cities and regions, as well as the role of public and civic institutions within them, are affected by technological change – forcing us to re-examine the possibilities of community development.

The new possibilities are related to two core characteristics: *the connection or identity to place* and the *capacity to create products that interest the private sector and serve a public purpose*.

In light of new technology and the economic changes that accompany it, locality or place has a contradictory meaning. The natural resources, identities and historical assets of a place no longer pre-determine where a job location, shopping decision or investment allocation

will be made. The speed of information technology allows for production and distribution to be spatially disconnected.

At the same time, the “place neutrality” of decisions means that if you can be anywhere, then why not be in a place with skilled labor, a strong quality of life, good schools, an affordable housing stock and a well-functioning civic and public structure? Why locate in a place where poverty and the social costs resulting from poverty threaten the quality of life?

The positioning of community development is even more important when the changing roles of the public and private sector are taken into consideration. The public sector is increasingly limited in its mission, capacity and social reach. The private sector is increasingly detached from place-based civic and institutional life, as well as from the systems and culture of public institutions. In this context, a host of civic institutions, including community development organizations (CDOs), become critical. They can organize planning, investment and development functions that the public and private sector cannot or will not do by themselves.

The civic positioning of CDOs is, however, only realized through its ability to produce something of public and private value. We see this



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today when CDOs become brokers between low-income residents and companies experiencing labor-market shortages. The best CDOs construct social networks that efficiently link the demand and supply of labor. They negotiate public and private relationships and systems across a regional economy and become value-added partners to low-income households and private firms.

The new positioning of place and product can only happen if the organizational infrastructure of community development changes and evolves; if the strongest institutions learn how to expand their geography of influence so that they have regional economic and civic influence; if they learn how to forge strategic alliances with other civic institutions and private sector partners, and build the intellectual capital and management capacity to recognize and implement a new generation of opportunities.

In his treatise on the new information, city planner Manual Castells notes that the new metropolitan economies of the world are connected to global capital, talent and information flows, while simultaneously disconnected in terms of their own social relationships and sense of community. The challenge for 21st century community development may very well be to position itself as a form of both economic and social connectivity – as the civic glue that simultaneously promotes neighborhood and regional well-being.