Gainesville wants to become "more competitive" as a city.

In pursuit of that worthy goal, the city government has created a Task Force, given it a staff, and put it to work. The Task Force has been urged to approach "competitiveness" for Gainesville as if it were a blank sheet of paper. It has been told to think broadly, widely, creatively and freshly.

It has been challenged to think differently, with the understanding that breaking out of the boundaries and borders of conventional wisdom and accepted practices, while always difficult and sometimes frustrating, is the only way to generate a distinctive approach for Gainesville that will actually accomplish the Task Force's mission. The Task Force has embraced the challenge of generating the kind of new ideas, practices and programs that will deliver on the original mission: a more competitive Gainesville.

If you want to be competitive, you have to be different.

What that means is that, unlike most — if not all — of the comparable initiatives in cities across the country and around the world, Gainesville has the freedom and the opportunity to ask the right questions. That's profoundly important, in fact, essential. If you do not ask the right questions about competitiveness, you cannot possibly generate the right answers.

So the right place to start is with the right questions. With enough hard work and creative thought, the right answers will emerge from the right questions.

What Does It Mean to Be "More Competitive"?

There is a global burst of interest in being more competitive. The reason seems clear: the dizzying, dramatic and unpredictable rate of change that is upsetting and disrupting economic, social and political norms everywhere.

Technology has disrupted old businesses and old business models. Whole economic sectors and traditional industries have shrunk— some have even disappeared. Things that used to seem predictable, dependable, immutable have all been tossed to one side. That's as true for individuals and families as it is for organizations, businesses, institutions, even governments.

At the same time, so much change has opened up new opportunities. Keen observers of the social and economic environment have suggested that it makes sense to recast "wicked problems" as "wicked opportunities." Innovation and entrepreneurial openings have put a new emphasis on education, collaboration, data and technology, and fresh thinking. For each of the old ways that are being disrupted, after all, there has to be a new one that is doing the disrupting.

The search for enhanced competitiveness is a smart response to these changed and changing times. It seems clear that it is far better to do what can be done to create the future, rather than simply wait for it to arrive.

That said, what kinds of responses have most cities and communities marshaled as their approaches to enhanced competitiveness?

A community might well ask,

- What are our core strengths? What makes us a desirable place for people to live and companies to do business?
- What are our weaknesses, our areas that need improvement or investment?
- How can we use our resources – human, natural, social, political – to devise a coherent, consistent economic development strategy that will allow us to differentiate ourselves from any other city or community?

A second strand of thinking about enhanced competitiveness involves the city government itself. A number of years ago, Jack Welch, when he was the CEO of General Electric, posed a provocative, challenging strategic question for American business: What if technological change and customer empowerment meant that no established company could ever again raise its prices? What would that mean for the way they did business? Today most governments face that exact question, but not as a thought exercise: They simply cannot raise new taxes or revenues; they have to come up with a different way of doing business.

In the context of enhanced competitiveness, that financial constraint can be a positive forcing mechanism. Cities will have to learn how to do more, or at least as much, with fewer resources. City government will need to streamline its operations, reorganize its functions, alter its reporting relationships. The idea is that a city can become more competitive by become leaner and more efficient.

But if those are the two most common responses to the challenge of becoming more competitive, the question remains: Is that really what it means to become competitive? And if those responses are the most common ones, does that also mean that they are the least likely to yield real differentiation – and real competitiveness? In other words, if that's what everyone else is doing, does it make sense for Gainesville to do it, too? Or is there another way, a way that would put Gainesville on a genuinely unique path?

What Is a City For? How Does a City Function?

It's easy to confuse what a city does with what a city is for. But what a city does on a daily basis is not really what a city is for.

One of the Harvard Business Review's most famous articles, "Marketing Myopia" by Ted Levitt, makes the point very effectively. The reason the railroads went out of business, Levitt wrote, was that they thought they were in the railroad business. They should have realized they were in the transportation business. In other words, they mistook what they did with why they were in business.

The same could be said for the city. Because the city has been charged with a variety of responsibilities, from public safety to public transportation, it's easy to mistake the purpose of the city for the functions it performs. But the purpose of the city is not to run its various departments. That's what the city does, not what it is for.

So what is the city for? The city exists, fundamentally, for the people of the city.

It makes common sense that the city should function to serve the people of Gainesville. It should be designed and operated in a way that will make the lives, the work, the daily experiences of the people of Gainesville as pleasant, enjoyable, efficient and positive as possible. Every day, as much as possible, the people of Gainesville should have excellent "user experiences" as they go about their daily lives.

Every day, there are tens of thousands, perhaps millions, of interactions between the city and the people of the city. Each of those interactions is a "moment of truth," a user experience that is either a positive, pleasant experience – or not.

The same holds true, of course, for every business and every user experience that it has with its customers. Companies that focus on crafting the highest quality user experience for their customers are rewarded with loyal, dedicated customers. Their users become "stark, raving fans."

What if the City of Gainesville became "the most user friendly city in America"? What if Gainesville concentrated on offering its citizens "the best user experiences in the world "?

Here's the big idea: That would be the most distinctive, unique and differentiated approach to making Gainesville "more competitive" as a city.

<u>What Does It Mean to Be User Friendly?</u>

If you ask almost anyone – members of the Task Force included – whether they've ever had an exceptional user experience, the answer is usually an enthusiastic "yes!" If you ask them to name it and describe it, they can, with the kind of clarity and specificity that is usually reserved for high-drama movie scripts.

It could be a retail store or a supermarket where the staff is especially friendly and helpful, where they seem to sense when you have a question or when you can't find what you 're looking for – the kind of shopping experience where you go home afterward thinking that you actually enjoyed the layout of the store, the lighting and organization of the merchandise, the ease with which you were able to make your way around the place, and the positive attitude that everyone had when you encountered them.

It could be a pizza parlor that lets you phone in your order or send it in via an app – and gives you regular updates on the progress your personal order is making as it moves through the preparation process, including an exact estimate as to when your doorbell will ring and the pizza

will be delivered.

Everyone, it seems, has a user experience that summarizes what it means to feel that the whole operation was designed with them in mind: a customer-centric, user-friendly experience, from end-to-end.

When you write down the components that comprise those experiences, it turns out there are a number of shared themes or defining elements that they all have in common.

- While they have all, in fact, been carefully, thoughtfully and comprehensively designed, to the user they feel unforced, natural and authentic.
- They are designed to give the user more power and control in the interaction. The user has access to information.
- Processes are transparent. The user knows what to expect, how the experience will unfold, and usually how long it will take. There are few to no surprises.
- The interaction with employees is focused on the satisfaction of the customer.
- The experience goes beyond a mere transaction; it is designed to forge an actual relationship between the customer and the employee of the organization.
- The experience includes a critically important feedback loop; the customer's evaluation of the experience actually matters in the operation of the business going forward.

What Does That Mean for a City?

The companies that have designed their operations to provide world-class user experiences have done the hard work to make it look easy. They have combined the best capabilities of information technology, design thinking, workforce training and development and leadership development at all levels of the organization to re-imagine what the company is for and how it functions. They have built a culture and a set of practices that constantly reinforce that singleness of purpose.

There are signs that this approach is being applied in bits and pieces in some cities.

In New York City, for example, the city sponsored an ongoing series of "hackathons." The city opened up its data sets to all users and hosted a competition to see which team of urban entrepreneurs could come up with the most useful and compelling app to make the city more user friendly.

In the world of entrepreneurship and urban design, apps have begun to emerge without the impetus of the city government to give people more direct influence over how the city works or more information to make their interaction with the city's offerings faster, easier and more convenient. For example, "See, Click, Fix", an app that was initially developed in New Haven, Connecticut by an enterprising social entrepreneur, gives any citizen who has the app on his or her smartphone the ability to see a problem – a pothole or missing stop sign – click on a button to report it to the proper city agency, and monitor the city's response to fix it. Other examples

include apps that put public transportation schedules on smartphones; park and recreation schedules; and a variety of other interactions that take place in the day-to-day lives of the city's people.

<u>What Would It Mean To Be the Most User Friendly City in America?</u>

What if?

What if the physical environment and arrangement of City Hall and important city buildings had the same kind of welcoming appearance as a world-class hotel or an inviting coffee shop?

What if, when you moved to the city, you could get one card that served a variety of purposes: your library card, your driver's license, your card to community activities- what if one card were your "one-stop-shop" for all things city?

What if every department in the city had the equivalent of a "genius bar" where you could make an appointment with qualified city employees who would resolve any problem you have to your satisfaction?

What if the city put as much information on apps as possible, so that control over information was in the hands of and on the smartphones of as many people as possible?

What if working for the city became the most prestigious, sought after job in Gainesville, because of the respect and standing accorded to public employees for the exceptional job they do in achieving exceptional customer experiences?

What if, in Gainesville, the work of becoming the most user-friendly city in America went beyond small-scale experiments and became the systems-based approach to every aspect of the city's culture and operations?

At the moment, those are simply "what if?" questions. But used by the Task Force and the city as a whole, they can frame an entirely new and different conversation about the future of Gainesville.

<u>How Does User-Friendliness Translate Into Competitiveness?</u>

Our goal is to make Gainesville "more competitive." That means Gainesville should be the community of choice for more people, more businesses, more service agencies, more entrepreneurs, more artists, more residents, more students.

It should offer its people more choice, more opportunity, more possibilities. In fact, the great urbanist, Jane Jacobs, once wrote that the purpose of a great city is choice: to give more people more choices.

How can Gainesville achieve that goal?

One answer would be to do what other cities are doing – pursuing economic development strategies and government reorganization – but to do it slightly better.

But there's a better answer: Based on the change that is taking place in the world, both public and private, the better answer would be to change the game. To do something that no other city is doing. To play for a higher level purpose, to aspire to a more distinctive – a more competitive – way to become more competitive.

We have the components, the capability to do just that. We have the technology to put information into the hands of most if not all the people of the city. We have the practices of design thinking to help guide us in asking the right questions, looking in the right places, re-designing the user experience in everyday life in the city. We know how to develop and train the city's employees around a new purpose and a new set of practices. And we have leadership that is ready to embrace this fundamental re-design.

How does the city learn to see itself through the eyes of its people?

To the best of our knowledge, no city is asking this question in a comprehensive way – despite the fact that the opportunity is clearly there. That is why we believe this approach represents the most innovative path forward for Gainesville. It represents the kind of thinking that can actually deliver competitive advantage to Gainesville – by re-imagining and re-designing the city around the real lives of its people.