

Can Hamilton become the new Pittsburgh?



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A city once maligned for its grimy steel industry -- not unlike Hamilton -- has spent 30 years evolving into a progressive, artsy, high-tech city, voted the best place to live in the United States

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Newly scrubbed and ready for its close-up, Pittsburgh is promising a glimpse of a clean, green post-industrial future as the leaders of the world's 20 most powerful economies converge here Thursday to compare notes on slaying the dragon of global recession.

The timing is fortuitous for a city whose molten blend of steelworks and smog was once described as "hell with the lid off" by Boston writer James Parton.

Thirty years have passed since the steel industry collapsed -- a crash that cost Pittsburgh nearly half its population and, many assumed, its future.

Today, at 312,000 people with the surrounding seven counties boasting 2.5 million, there is more than a whiff of renaissance in the city's now breathable air.

USA Today hails the reviving city's skyline nestled in a panoramic triangle of rivers and hills as the second most impressive in the United States, behind New York. The Economist magazine of London, England, goes further, recently declaring it "America's most livable city," and 29th in the world.

Pittsburgh? Some have known of its charms for decades, many don't. It is not unlike the reputation of Hamilton -- based on an ignorant, dated waterfront view of a smoke-belching industry that belies its geographic beauty and diversifying economy of the last 30 years.

Says Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell: "Many of the great steel factories that went for blocks and blocks and blocks, they're gone. But they've been replaced by a clean green renaissance, a combination of green jobs, life sciences jobs, robotics, high-technology manufacturing, recreation and entertainment."

It is the governor's job to lead such boosterism. But he is not just blowing smoke. When the G20 comes to town, it will set up shop in the world's largest "green" building, the David Lawrence Convention Center, the most impressive of 39 structures driving for a zero-carbon footprint.

Rendell, in his sixth year as governor, acknowledges the transformation was decades in the making and it took the combined heft of public, private and academic leaders to bring about.

But finally, Pittsburgh has something to show for it, including new engines of prosperity driving for a lion's share of high-technology jobs. These past six years, the state has steered more than \$1 billion US into green economy projects, backed by legislation establishing the country's most aggressive standards for solar and photovoltaic power.

A key factor, other Pittsburgh backers say, is the depth of the local talent pool, with 35 universities and colleges in the region, including University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. A legacy of the rich industrialists of an earlier era, the schools have been instrumental partners in a multidisciplinary, cross-industry effort to open new horizons in areas such as nanotechnology.

"Through bad times and good times -- and we've seen both --Pittsburgh is focusing on finding technology solutions," said Greg Babe, president and CEO of Bayer Corp.

Babe notes the creation in 2006 by public and private stakeholders of a Pittsburgh nanotech centre that has underwritten 12 projects so far, ranging from the development of organic-based solar cells to energy efficient LED lighting.

"This is playing a key role in accelerating the commercialization of nanotech research. We're using the funding to bridge the 'valley of death' between the proof of concept and customer-relevant products," he said.

Babe said results thus far suggest emerging nanotech breakthroughs could be "a game-changer" in advanced wind energy production, pointing to research showing that the addition of as few as 20 kilograms of ultra-lightweight carbon nanotubes under development in Pittsburgh can reduce the weight of the wind turbine blade by as much as three tonnes.

The same technology, he said, is being applied to strengthen metals such as aluminum and magnesium "so that we get a lightweight outcome with the strength of steel that could be applied to make lighter engine blocks and much, much more."

The hard numbers don't fully support Pittsburgh's buoyant tub-thumping.

Unemployment here is rising, as are bankruptcies. But Governor Rendell stresses that the area's jobless rate remains "a point or more" better than the national average (which is 10 per cent), notwithstanding the region's extreme exposure to the crash of the automotive and housing sectors.

But as a state, Pennsylvania is also the most aggressive in courting overseas business, having placed representatives in 31 countries, including Canada, which remains its leading trade partner.

If you go looking for a U.S. state business office in India, he points out, Pennsylvania is the only one you will find.

Pennsylvania's \$34.3 billion US in exports last year included shipments from more than 100 companies with a foothold in the Pittsburgh area that do \$1 billion of business each year.

Says Rendell: "Our investment in international business development is to aid the small- and middle-sized companies with exports. They don't know how to do it and they need the help," he said.

The most impressive signs of Pittsburgh life, however, are aesthetic, from the revival of a derelict 14-block swath of the downtown core into a culture district studded with museums and theatres to the enlivened south and north ends, the latter now the home of the glistening seven-storey Andy Warhol Museum.

"Art is often where this begins," says Warhol Museum director Tom Sokolowski, whose venue has mounted touring Warhol exhibits in 15 of the 19 countries coming for the G20. Warhol was born in Pittsburgh.

"When I came to Pittsburgh 13 years ago, the north shore was old and broken down."

But as so often happens in the backdraft of decline, the neighbourhood drew in young artists in search of affordable terrain to hone their talent.

"It is a new kind of Florence," Sokolowski said, tempting the bounds of hyperbole. "Pittsburgh is a place that young artists can come, perhaps work part-time as a chef at a greasy spoon, but spend most of their time making their art. That is not feasible in big capitals anymore."

A long afternoon's wander through Pittsburgh on foot, however, shows plenty of gaps in the reviving city's smile.

The eastern stretch of the city's downtown, beyond the historic H.J. Heinz factory, is still playing catch-up, with former industrial brown fields awaiting new purpose.

Yet further northeast the strip district is rising anew with a rugged, rustic blend of wholesale markets, night clubs and bars.

"You never have to worry about finding something to do. Pittsburgh has a lot going on these days," said Stephen Pennington, 30, a new resident from Detroit.

"I look back at my time at GM and everybody I knew is gone ... But in Pittsburgh, there's energy at least. You can feel the place is back on its feet again."



