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A Wake Up Call for the Region

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Pittsiders like to recall that ten years ago Rand-McNally picked Pittsburgh as the most livable city in America. Maybe on their measures it was true, but those measures are not the ones people use.

A much more accurate barometer of the attractiveness of cities and regions is where people choose to live. At about the time of the Rand-McNally survey, people were leaving Pittsburgh for other places at one of the most rapid rates in the country. Between the 1980 and 1990 censuses, Pittsburgh’s population fell 12.8%. Among cities of 100,000 population or more, only three cities did worse -- Gary IN, Detroit, MI, and Newark, NJ.

Between 1970 and 1990, Pittsburgh’s population fell 30%. The decline is continuing. And, unlike many other declining areas, the loss of population is not mainly to the suburbs. The Pittsburgh region -- including Allegheny and neighboring counties -- lost almost 7% of its 1980 population by 1990. Only four other metropolitan regions in the country did worse! The average metropolitan area grew nearly 12% in the same decade.

The statistical profile of the region tells a lot about its problems and its prospects. There are relatively large numbers of older residents, over 65, and relatively few residents under 18. Only one metro area outside of Florida has a higher percentage of its population over 65. But there is population growth, not decline, in all of the Florida cities and counties with a comparable (or higher) proportions of older citizens. These areas are in the vanguard of one of the major industries of the future -- providing for an aging population.

Pittsburgh doesn't have the winter climate of Florida, of course, but it is much less humid in summer. And we have services in abundance that older people require
disproportionately such as hospitals and medical professionals.

Unlike Floridians (Carolinians or other retirement areas), Pittsburgers have done little or nothing to develop as a regional center for the care of an aging population. My own casual inquiries suggest that, mindful of our past glory as a great industrial center, many people disdain the service industries. They have listened to too much gibberish associating service jobs with hamburger "flippers" and other low paying jobs.

That's a myth -- a durable myth -- but a myth nonetheless. Service jobs include doctors, lawyers, accountants, and financial professionals. These are all services that older residents use heavily, in some cases disproportionately. And they are all high-paying professions. Add recreational activities and entertainment attractive to older residents, plus restaurants and retirement homes, and there is an industry that builds on some of the unique resources of the region.

To make this work, there would have to be reduced taxes on estates and property. Probably other changes would be needed also. Many people would still go south for the winter, but their principal residences would be here. They would live most of the year here and purchase many of their services here. Others would come to be closer to children, grandchildren, relatives and friends.

This is one of many possible suggestions. What are the others? If we reduce regulation, lower taxes, privatize assets and establish a proper climate to attract investment, market forces and entrepreneurs will answer that question far better than I. The community's job is to provide the framework that encourages investment not build stadiums or give tax breaks to favored companies.

The most important first change must be in leadership and attitudes. The steel industry, long Pittsburgh's main employer, reached its peak more than thirty years ago. Pittsburgh and this region have been declining ever since. A few efforts have been made to slow or stop the decline, but most of the people in leadership positions either ignore the problem, look for a scapegoat, throw up their hands, or pin their hopes on a baseball stadium.

Proper leadership can make the region grow again. It's simply not true that all
of the growth is in the south and the west. Many cities and regions have revived and
grown. There are regional differences everywhere. New Orleans declined while
Atlanta boomed. Beaumont declined while Houston and Dallas boomed. In our own
general area, Columbus boomed while we declined.

There is no mystery about what needs to be done. Taxes are too high; business
regulations are too burdensome; the reputation of the region for strikes and labor
disputes is too entrenched. These problems are not unique to this region. Fifteen or
twenty years ago, Cleveland faced similar problems. With leadership and vision,
Cleveland has worked to overcome its problems. And it has succeeded.

Nothing will happen in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, or this region until
someone takes responsibility for getting started.

Pittsburgh and this region have great resources and many opportunities.
Allegheny County has three new commissioners in 1996. They should issue -- jointly --
a wake-up call for the region and offer the leadership that, to this point, has been
lacking.