

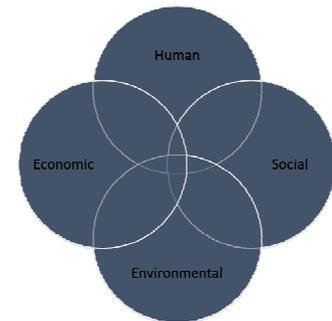
Diagnosis & Prescription For Change

by Larry Brooks

Presentation to the League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara
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Locally, there's been a lot of good news lately, hasn't there? HarborCenter and Canalside, SolarCity and Riverbend, the Buffalo Niagara medical campus, lots of new hotels and restaurants and also an uptick in population. It's got a lot of people locally talking about rebirth, Renaissance and come back. Is that the whole story? How are we really doing?

I wrote a book recently and part one of the book is a state of the region report. It's an attempt to answer that question. To answer I needed a method. What I found was the healthy communities model which was developed by couple of academics back in the 1980s. Take a look at this diagram. They said that a healthy community has essentially four dimensions: human, social, economic, and environmental. Some version of this model is used around the world today by agencies as diverse as the United Nations, the World Bank, the international monetary fund. Even in the private sector global investment advisory firm A T Kearney uses a similar model to rank the globally significant cities. Don't go looking for Buffalo on the list of 100 top globally significant cities.



I realized in all the recent news is that most of it is in this economic dimension. What about the rest? Let's take a look.

The human dimension involves things like demographics, educational attainment, and the health of the population. For decades the population of the region, particularly of the city of Buffalo, has been declining which is in the opposite direction of the rest of the state and the rest of the country. But in the last few years the Census Bureau estimates that our population is coming back. That's good news right? Well yes but there are a couple of important qualifications. For starters, the normal state of the population is a surplus of births over deaths, about 1500 people. In addition to that, this region is one of the destinations for immigration and refugee relocation, primarily because the federal government helps sponsor that and they get more bang for their buck in this area than they would say downstate or in the capital region. Erie County for instance receives 40% of the refugee resettlement in New York State, about 1000 people a year. So if you were to add the surplus of births over deaths with the refugee population and nobody else were to move out or in, the population should increase by about 2500 year or better. But in fact the Census Bureau estimates an increase of just a few hundred. In my research I found out one important fact: the in migration rate—that is the amount of people moving in here—is among the lowest in the nation of the top 100 metros. That so that is to say, when people move around the country this is one of their last choices among the top 100 metros. Still, this reversal of a decades long trend is good news.

Education this is one of the area strengths. Our high school graduation rate, for instance, is higher than state and national averages. And our system of higher education — colleges and universities — is so strong that over 80,000 students are enrolled and the industry brings in over \$3 billion into our economy. UB is one of the most successful universities in the United States and in the top 10 for attracting international students.

But when we look at health we get into some really bad news. Several surveys indicate that the health of the population here is below average. I will mention just one of those surveys: the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County health rankings. For years now they've been collecting health data for all the counties in all the states in the union and comparing the counties within a state. They use dozens of indicators—human, social, economic and environmental—

and their 2017 report says that in New York State, Niagara County's 58th and Erie County is 50th out of 62 New York State counties. Their Health Rankings were just released for 2017 and is linked here.

<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/new-york/2017/rankings/erie/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot>

What this means is that Niagara and Erie County are two of the unhealthiest counties in New York State in which to live. When I tell that to people they immediately asked the question "why is that?" Some of them follow up with is "is it the environment?" The Erie County health department's community health assessment says that it's lifestyle choices, above all else, number one reason. Lifestyle choices are things like diet, exercise, and smoking. It's easy to see why we might have a population that's unhealthier than the rest of the states in the nation. Just look at the Buffalo diet. Best-selling author Michael Pollan recently did a documentary for PBS called "In defense of food" and it began with a critique of the Western diet which is essentially very unhealthy. He interviewed a number of experts and one of them was Doctor David Kessler the former Commissioner of the FDA. Doctor Kessler's example of what's wrong with the Western diet was, "take Buffalo wings. What are they? You start off with the fatty part of the chicken, usually fried in the manufacturing plant first, that pushes a lot of fat into the chicken wing... Fried usually again in the restaurant that pushes more fat into it... Then red sauce — what is it? Sugar and salt. The creamy white sauce on the side? Fat, sugar, and salt. What are we eating? Fat on fat on fat on sugar and fat, sugar and salt." Here in Buffalo we celebrate this bad dietary item with an annual Festival that features a binge eating contest! I could go on all day about the Buffalo diet but let's move on.

The Social dimension refers to the quantity and quality of relationships between people. The concept of social capital really took off in the 1990s when sociologist Robert Putnam published his groundbreaking book "Bowling Alone." In it he described many indicators of social capital and made a strong case that it's declining across the United States including our region. So let's look at Buffalo.

Table 2.2: Volunteering Specifics

Place	Donates to charity	Attends meetings	Active in neighborhood	Volunteer rate 2004	Volunteer rate 2012	Change from '04-'12
USA	51.0%	9.0%	8.3%	28.8%	26.5%	-2.3%
New York State	44.9%	8.5%	6.5%	21.1%	19.6%	-1.5%
Metro Buffalo	60.9%	8.0%	4.7%	29.9%	25.8%	-4.1%

Source: Corporation for National And Community Service, <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/export.cfm>, accessed 8/19/14.

There are many indicators of social capital: things like membership in fraternal organizations, religious attendance, volunteering and philanthropy, and so on. There are agencies which look at and measure some of these things. We got some good news: percentage of people donating to charity in our region is significantly above state and national averages and the voter engagement from the region in the 2012 presidential election was above state and national averages.

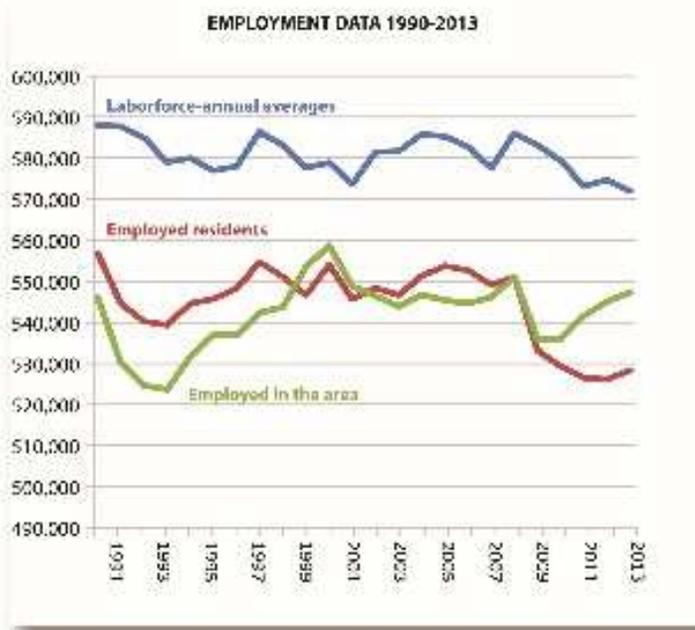
Table 2.3: Family and marriage indicators

Subject	United States	New York State	Buffalo Niagara Falls Metro
Family households (families)	66.5%	64.3%	61.4%
Married-couple family	48.8%	44.5%	43.1%
Nonfamily households	33.5%	35.7%	38.6%
Average household size	2.62	2.60	2.36
Average family size	3.21	3.26	3.02

Source: American Fact Finder, custom data table DP 02, Selected Social Characteristics in the United States, 2009-2011

American Community Survey Three-Year Estimates, accessed 6/26/14.

But perhaps one of the most critical indicators of human capital would be marriage and family. Sociologist Charles Murray thinks that marriage is a core foundational relationship in our society. So how well are we doing? Take a look at this chart please regarding family households. Below average percentages for the state and the nation regarding family households, married couple families, average household size, and average family size. These key indicators of social capital are below average. Medical science has been piling on the evidence that the quality of one’s social capital impacts an individual’s health—the more relationships and the better the quality, the better the individual’s health. Could these indicators that are below average also cause relatively poor health?

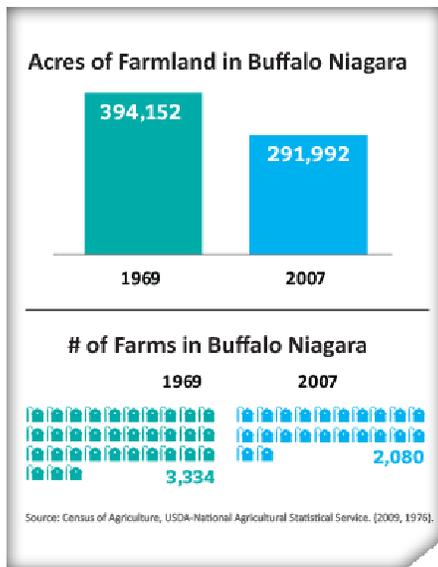


Let’s move on to the economic sector. Good news recently is we have increased employment since the recession and our per capita income and household income and the Metro GDP all increased. Also this is really important: despite all the negative press about the city of Buffalo being one of the poorest in the nation, the poverty rate for the region is just about average for the state and the nation. But the bad news is we concentrate our poverty into two urban areas and The bad press associated with the city of Buffalo’s poverty rate damages the entire region. I mentioned are been improvements in employment and per capita income but the local media report the fact that our improvements are considerably slower than they are across the state and the rest of the nation. Improving all right but not as fast as everybody else.

Environment: I mentioned before I think health is one of the most important indicators of the state of the region. Well this one fact about our environment is also one of the key factors in the state of our region: we are on the edge of one fifth of the earth’s surface freshwater. In this century water will become an increasingly precious resource, perhaps the most valuable of all resources and we have access to one of the world’s largest supplies.

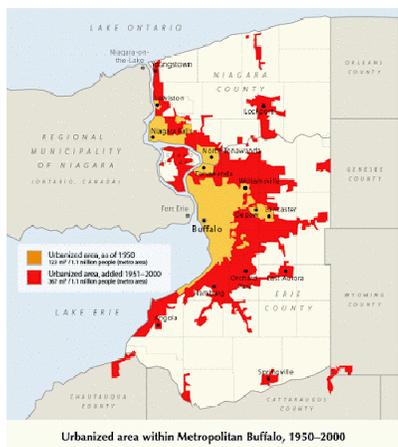
Also as climate change worsens Buffalo is one of the most climate resilient cities in North America. Scientists have done simulations of how climate change will impact areas not only on this continent but around the world. Some coastal cities will get flooded for instance. But it is predicted that the Buffalo Metro area is one of just a few areas in North America where climate change will actually improve things. But a lot of bad news comes with this. There are currently five major threats to Great Lakes water: climate change — as winters get warmer there is less of an ice sheet cover on the lakes which allows more evaporation which could allow more water to evaporate and disappear from the watershed;

Pollution [I’ll speak more about this later]; diversion which means if some people might take our water out of the watershed it’s gone forever; loss of habitat for the flora and fauna that keep the Great Lakes system healthy and naturally recycling, and invasive species. We continue to pollute our air. Despite our loss of heavy industry, there are still 53 permitted polluting facilities in Tonawanda alone including the place where the state’s highest levels of benzene emissions are recorded. Up in Niagara Falls, Covanta dumped 22 tons of hazardous air pollutants into the air in 2012. We have two nuclear waste facilities in the area and we have the only active toxic waste landfill in the northeastern United States. Speaking of pollutants, the city of Buffalo has the oldest housing stock in the United States. With old houses comes lots of lead and asbestos. It is well-known that this lead pollution in houses in Buffalo has led to the city’s being one of the worst locations for lead poisoning in children in New York State.



We used to have an abundance of fertile farmland but we’re losing 500 acres per year to sprawl.

The second part of my book is a look at reasons why this area is not doing as well perhaps as the rest of the country and certainly not doing as well as we could. Don’t blame the St. Lawrence Seaway—that’s one of the myths about our region. The most important reason I think is sprawl.



Take a look at this map: notice how the light-colored region was the urbanized areas of the 1950s and the rest of the shaded area demonstrates the sprawl. Keep in mind this was happening as our population was declining! we’re spreading ourselves thin. Remember this costs us more money. For example, Erie County has more miles of roads to maintain than any other county in New York State. That costs money. When you hear news of a new subdivision being built out in Lancaster or Wheatfield on former farmland, be very sad—it costs us a lot of money. Think of it in terms of chemistry: sprawl means we spread out over a wider area meaning we are kind of

like diluting our resources. When you think about dilution you think that weakens things. That's the way it works for sprawl: we spread resources over a larger area, we are diluting our resources. Also think in terms of physics of mass: the greater the mass, the greater the attraction. If we don't concentrate our resources into a critical mass, we'll be less likely to attract people and businesses to our region.

Fractured governance too is one of the critical areas that has led to our demise, the fact that the region has 64 different governments. It means we're not working together as a team, it means we're competing against each other as well as regions across the state and nation, and increases the cost of living here. Across the border southern Ontario has regional government and Hamilton and Saint Catherine are growing. This is a consequence of our leadership. The best book on the region by far, including my book in the lot, but the best book which should be mandatory reading for every resident is Power Failure by Diana Dillaway. There is no better book explaining why Buffalo is what it is today. The author looked at the second half of the 20th century and she interviewed by dozens of local policymakers and revealed flaws and mistakes of area leadership. These problems with the jobs and the economy, it's not just us it's a Great Lakes problem. For instance, from the year 2000 to 2010, only seven of the top 100 metros lost population. Six of those including Buffalo are Great Lakes cities. Part of the problem is New York state taxes. One of the reasons for New York State taxes being so high is that we have so much government, such as 64 governments in the Erie Niagara Metro Buffalo region.

The last part of my book I offer solutions to our problems away to improve what's going on in our region. Lots of people offer solutions and some of them are false hopes and silver bullets and they won't work. For instance, forget about the Buffalo Bills and a new peace bridge: they are not gonna do a damn bit of good for solving our problems.

Let's start with our human capital: we need to grow our population. One bit of good news is the fact that it's already started moving in that direction. But an interesting and promising development across the world is the side effect of what is unfortunate—climate change. Because we are a climate resilient city we will be a go-to destination for climate change refugees. They will see things are not bad here and they will want to come here. We should be prepared for that because these climate change refugees will bring with them lots of talent, money and hope.

When it gets to health we've got to change our lifestyle. We have to cut back on the food festivals and binge eating and start celebrating good eating. When it comes to improving the health of the population it begins with walking. I have been working with the Wellness Institute of Greater Buffalo and Western New York and they've got a program get people walking again.

Even though our education infrastructure is good there's always room for improvement and the very best thing we can do to improve the state of education in this region is to consolidate all our school districts into one. Several large metropolitan areas similar in size to our in terms of area and population such as Fairfax County Virginia and Charlotte North Carolina are growing regions and they still manage all those students in one school district. Here the extreme example of the insanity of separate school districts can be found in Cheektowaga where there are four separate school districts for the town alone and some of the town students are also serviced by Lancaster and Depew. This is insane: six school districts for 8000 students with separate superintendents, school boards, and central administration offices. People complain about the school taxes all the time but if you suggest consolidation they oppose it—they want their separate school districts but they don't want to pay what it costs.

When it gets to social capital there's a similar thing we can do to really improve things around here and that is to consolidate all of our municipal governments into a regional government. The regions of the country that have done that have been highly successful. Many independent academics and consultants have looked at the state of our region and all recommended the same thing: merging governments into one, creating one team that works together to build our region as one community. One of the reasons I chose the photo on the cover of my book is I think it symbolizes the fractured governance of the region our community leadership is in pieces, it's fragmented and therefore it does not

function well. We need to consolidate in order to grow strong. Diana Dillaway pointed out that our elected officials and the leadership in the business community has failed us in the second half of the 20th century.

Let me be blunt: the current political and business leadership is dysfunctional. It does not serve the region well. We need reform. How do we do it? It's already been happening. The good news is that many not for profits have stepped forward in leadership roles and begun real change, real reform. Good example of this is the Partnership for the Public Good a coalition of over 150 organizations which sets out a community legislative agenda every single year. That agenda as presented to our legislatures at the municipal, county, and state levels and resulted in real legislative change. There are a number of organizations like that and some of the real change in the area is happening because of them. Another good example is the Homeless Alliance of Western New York. Real progress is being made in reducing homelessness in the region because of the leadership of the homeless alliance and its executive Director Dale Zuchlewski. On the east side of Buffalo City Hall has more or less neglected the social problems of the area. But a not-for-profit community organization the Lieutenant Colonel Matt Urban center for human services has filled that gap and provided many programs for the people of the east side. The Community Foundation For Greater Buffalo is initiating many innovative programs in the region such as the Say Yes to education program which has been credited for our dramatic increase in the number of city of Buffalo students that are going on to colleges and universities.

Take Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper. Around the Great Lakes there are 43 areas of concern that is highly polluted watersheds. One of those is the Buffalo River watershed and it was dangerously polluted in the 1960s and 70s at which point it actually caught fire that's right a water body caught fire because it was so polluted. So citizens group Friends of the Buffalo River organized in 1989 today it's called Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper and under the Clean Water Act there is a new program for cleaning up these areas of concern. Of the 43 around the Great Lakes Buffalo River is the only cleanup program that is led by a nonprofit Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper and includes a coalition of the Army Corps of Engineers New York State DEC, federal EPA and the private Corporation Honeywell. They just completed a 40 some million-dollar dredging and cleanup of the pollutants in the Buffalo River and the consequence of that is a rebirth in development along the river. I invite all of you to stop by RiverWorks the new development on Ganson Street on a weekend in the summer in good weather. The River will be filled with watercraft of every kind, people all around and this is made possible by the fact that the river is being cleaned up which is made possible by Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper. The solution to the future is not in government and not in the business community but in the nonprofit community. Individuals within those organizations are the true new leadership of the future. The list is long but it includes Aaron Bartley of PUSH, Justin Booth of GoBike Buffalo, Julie Barrett O'Neill former Riverkeeper now at the Buffalo sewer authority, Peg Overdorf of the Valley community Association, Laura Kelly the first Ward Association, Dave Spearing of Tiff nature preserve, Melissa Fratello of grassroots gardens, Darren Cotton and Aaron Krolikowski of the University District, and many many others and they will be continuing the momentum of this good work for many years to come.

When we get to economic capital we've got a lot of problems to correct. Despite the recent turnaround there are signs that this is not sustainable. For instance, the city of Buffalo is almost a ward of the state and a significant portion of their budget comes from state aid. It is not a city that stands on its own legs. The Buffalo billion has been spent. There is not going to be a repeat of that to carry forward new business formation and lots of the capital construction projects that we've seen in the past. After that the current new construction on the Buffalo Niagara medical campus, what's left?

The solution to our economic capital woes begin with densify. Densify means to make denser or condense. The city of Buffalo is a not a very dense city when you compare largest cities in the country. Judging by sprawl, a lot of people in this region do not like dense population — they prefer when things are very spread out. But as explained before that's a bad thing. If we're going to solve our area's woes, we need to condense our population into a smaller area. Some people fear that thinking that with densification comes congestion and a lot of unpleasant things that impact quality of life. But let me tell you a little something: across United States only 16 Metro areas have within it a neighborhood that has a density of over 10,000 persons per square mile. One of those metros is Buffalo Niagara Falls and the neighborhood that has a

density of over 10,000 persons per square mile is the village of Kenmore, which has won many prizes as a desirable place to live. Now one of the factors involved in that density is that most of the land area is residential compared to say Buffalo where a lot of land area is institutional or industrial or parkland or vacant space. But you can see that high density means high quality of life. There's a worldwide trend toward densification; it's happening everywhere and the most globally significant cities are all dense cities. With density comes diversity, creativity and strength. Density is exciting and we don't have that.

One other economic potential that needs to be developed is all the vacant land in the city of Buffalo. Consider it a blank canvas. We're at a point in our development where we have so much vacant land is like a blank canvas. We can put some of this vacant land in the land bank until ready and then go in and build from the ground up and build at the right way.

We also have good infrastructure. Bob Shibley the Dean of the school of architecture and planning gives lectures in which he talks about the city of Buffalo's good bones. What that is the layout of streets and infrastructure water and land that comprises the basic skeleton onto which to build the city and turns out we have really good bones. Part of the infrastructure includes the Olmsted parks system which was Olmsted's masterpiece and also the first of its kind in America. When it was completed Frederick Law Olmsted said that this was the best-designed city in the United States. Have we capitalized on it? No. In fact one of the things I found in my research is that despite having one of Olmsted parks systems, we have a lot smaller percentage of acreage devoted to parks then places like Atlanta, Phoenix, and even New York City has more percentage of acreage devoted to parkland than Buffalo does.

When we start with the bone structure and build on it, the city of Buffalo has put on suburban style residential development onto its infrastructure. This won't support a rapid transit system and has led to the cutback of the NFTA Metro bus routes. What we need is more multifamily housing. Another economic improvement we can do is to reform our industrial development agencies so that they don't compete one against the other. A perfect example of why it's dysfunctional is the story of Premier Liquors which used to be located in the town of Tonawanda on Delaware Avenue. They actually received taxpayer assistance to move a few miles to the east into a new location in Amherst right across the Tonawanda line and are doing an amazing profit-making business. The taxpayers help to do that. We have to reform the industrial development agencies.

There are some major projects which could really improve things around here create jobs and in the end reduce the cost of living in the area. The first of these is to work on a smart grid. Years ago engineers, academics and scientists realized that are the electrical infrastructure in the United States of America is highly inefficient. How many of you remember this back in August 2003, there was a major blackout in this area caused by a breakdown in a substation in Ohio. The smart grid is a solution to that and by building the smart grid we will reduce the need for electric generating facilities and reduce the eventual price of electricity in your house. The smart grid will be able to draw the wind energy from the Great Plains and solar energy from the southwestern United States into this area around-the-clock. It will create high paying construction and engineering and technical jobs and result in a cleaner environment. What are we waiting for? It's being blocked by the coal, oil, and gas industries who want to maintain the status quo.

Another concept to consider high-speed rail. Replacing the central transportation corridors with high-speed rail would result not only in a reduction of traffic congestion and cost of maintenance of the roads but also improve the number of hours people have for productive work: instead of sitting in a car in nonproductive hours they could be commuters in high-speed rail network and free up their time to do their business correspondence or recreational reading. High-speed rail concept is being considered for New York State along the central corridor that the Thruway runs but it's a very conventional thing with only marginal improvements in travel time. I can tell you right now that when this Empire State corridor plan gets implemented it will not result in major savings or changes in transportation behavior and therefore will be a very expensive failure. A new high-speed rail concept would require the maglev propulsion system running on renewable energy and use small vehicles traveling at much more frequent intervals. If it's convenient people will abandon their cars jump on high-speed rail. There would be a lot more visitors to Western New York.

Lastly when I talk about regional consolidation I don't mean to stop at the borders of Erie and Niagara counties but take a look at this picture. Consider this region of Toronto, buffalo, Rochester. Urban studies theorist Richard Florida has studied these mega-regions in North America and he wrote in the Toronto globe and mail back in 2007 that this region is actually bigger than the San Francisco Silicon Valley mega-region, greater Paris, Hong Kong and Shanghai in terms of GDP. If it were its own country would be the 16th biggest in the world. it would also be the sixth or seventh largest in North America instead we have two American cities in decline when they should be succeeding and a border that gets harder to cross. The Great Lakes region is so powerful if we were to work together it would be the fourth-largest economy in the world only behind the US China and Japan. That's the states Minnesota Wisconsin Michigan Illinois Indiana Ohio Pennsylvania New York and the province of Ontario. Their combined economic activity would rank it as the fourth-largest economy in the world. So when people oppose consolidation they oppose economic progress.

When it comes to environmental capital there too we have a lot of promise. I mentioned before climate resiliency when climate change comes this will be one of the most comfortable places on earth. It will save energy to heat and cool and provide a comfortable living environment. The coastal flooding from climate change will force many people to leave the Atlantic coast and the Gulf coast and move inland. This could be one of the most desirable places in the world but we can't have people come here unless we repair our assets and we've got to get rid of our waste dumps and our pollution and everything else. People won't want to come here if they know that it's filled with toxic waste. Repairing all of that will result in jobs and a vibrant economy that brings federal money here and private money here for investment and we can't delay on another day in cleaning up our environmental disasters. Yes, it costs money and yes it is not as sexy as a new Bills Stadium but it will result in a better quality of life and an improved economy. So what are we waiting for?

To summarize this been a lot of good news lately but I'm telling you people, there's no rebirth, there's no come back, there is no Renaissance, just improvements and reversals of decades of decline. But this is an extraordinary place on the planet earth. I've traveled...and there's no place I would rather live. I think there is no other place with the potential to become a great place to live and I think one day we can be a globally significant region.