

BUFFALO BEST PRACTICES NOTES, JUNE 2021

Buffalo has had a history that basically has put them at the top and the bottom of the prosperity scale. Once thriving, with a population of 580,000, the city now has just 250,000 residents. The metro population of 1.1 million is less than half the size of metro Portland (2.6 million).

Buffalo began its rise as a result of its location and the building of the Erie Canal in the 1820's. The city is at the east end of Lake Erie, which is connected to others of the Great Lakes, so shipping natural resources (wood products, ore, grain, other ag products) through Buffalo was a natural development. After the Erie Canal opened

On October 26, 1825, when the Erie Canal officially opened, Buffalo became a hub of commerce. (Goods traveled east along the canal to the Hudson, then down to NYC. The canal was so successful that it was expanded twice, and the western terminus moved a little north of Buffalo to Tonawanda, NY. Buffalo, which incorporated as a city in 1832, became the 5th wealthiest city in the United States. (It remains New York's second-largest city.)

The railroads began emerging, and at first, rather than result in the canal being obsolete, they complemented barge traffic, and due to the hub that Buffalo had become, the railroads made Buffalo a major hub as well. For many years, the railroads and canal were prosperous together---the canal so much so that it stopped charging tolls!

Manufacturing also began in earnest in Buffalo due to its position as a hub of commerce and transportation, and the city became a manufacturing hotbed.

Over time, railroads were built elsewhere and began competing with Buffalo. In addition, the St Lawrence Seaway was completed, providing which was a serious challenge to Buffalo's commercial hub position. The Seaway was a less expensive, alternative to the canal for Canadian shippers, particularly for shipments of grain, which was by far, the largest commodity shipped east.

During that period of prosperity, Buffalo built architectural masterpieces which still exist, although some are abandoned and/or rundown today. Buffalo also attracted some major sports franchises, and still retains the Bills (NFL) and the Sabres (NHL). The community is very concerned about losing them, due to declining population, but they are very well supported by the fans and the community.

The city area is just 44 square miles, similar to Boston and San Francisco. With the decline in population, many structures were abandoned. Unlike in Detroit, the city and state have funded demolition, so that rather than seeing awful abandoned housing, you see empty lots full of grass and weeds.

Buffalo's economic slide has been consistent. Nothing has reversed the trends, as the reason for the city's rise has collapsed, and businesses have moved south or offshore. The remaining population is largely minority and poor. Leadership is trying

to 'live within their skin', meaning with a diminished population but with an infrastructure built for over double the number of citizens.

Some signs of hope---SUNY/Buffalo is there and attracts and educates bright young minds. The city wants to capture them after graduation, and leaders are hopeful that remote working could also be an attractor, given how cheap it is to live there....housing is especially cheap. There are signs that more and more residents are interested in downtown living, and more housing built there lately than in past years. The college is offering biz innovation types of classes to try and trigger more start-up enterprise.

One huge project that city leaders hope to energize is the old massive train station, just outside of downtown. Today, it is completely abandoned. (Buffalo's abandoned train station is very similar to Detroit's, where Ford announced plans to renovate and use it for an "innovation hub")

Weather is a real issue, as Buffalo's winters are brutal. Buffalo's history is similar to other cities across upstate NY....such as Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Albany/Schenectady, Rome.....all have prosperous pasts, but all struggling now.