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Group with passion for hard-luck cities holds conference

GLUE sees potential in Rust Belt communities

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By Diana Nelson Jones and Rich Lord / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

As the tour bus rumbled along Grant Street, guide Chris Koch called attention to the U.S. Steel Building and explained that the sidewalk is brown, like the building, because rust bleeds.

"Steel is supposed to rust, isn't it?" a rider called out.

Nothing wrong with rust. It's the quality that binds all the young tourists who were in town for three days through Saturday for the Great Lakes Urban Exchange, or GLUE, conference. There the label "Rust Belt" was worn with pride, even as some acknowledged the need to burnish its image.

Since it was founded four years ago, GLUE has gathered about 2,000 people in the network. Co-founders Sara Szurpicki of Detroit and Pittsburgher Abby Wilson had met in New York and decided to return to their hometowns to work on a project to encourage other young adults to stick to their less-than-fashionable hometowns and help raise the status of post-industrial cities among other young people.

The conference attracted about 120 people. They went on tours of the city and to specific sites, including the Burgh Bees Apiary in Homewood and Grow Pittsburgh's Braddock Farms.

In conference sessions, they heard about the Rust Belt's legacy of segregation; the challenge of eliciting minority voices in planning processes; innovations in community building such as GTECH Strategies' soil-remediating fields of sunflowers; and how rain gardens can benefit the old water-sewer infrastructure.

And although visitors voiced admiration for much of what's going on in Pittsburgh, they asked probing questions about how decisions are made.

For example, panelist Alix Levy, a consultant with South Side-based World-Class Industrial Network, described the transformation of the Connelley Vocational and Technical School into an Energy Innovation Center. Anchored by the likes of Eaton Corp., Bayer, and Johnson Controls, it also has union backing and will include an incubator for green energy start-ups.

GLUE members wanted to know about the tax breaks companies might tap to locate there, whether the \$77 million cost of transforming the school might be better spent elsewhere, and how much input Hill District residents have had in the process.

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A presentation on the Pittsburgh Pipeline effort to train high school students for water industry jobs took a similar turn. How, GLUE participants wanted to know, is the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority working with municipalities and residents? Answer: There's still much to be done on those fronts.

In discussion groups, participants shared details of efforts in Cleveland, St. Louis, Milwaukee and Buffalo, among others.

Eric Walker, director of organizing for People United for Sustainable Housing in Buffalo, described one of the city's western neighborhoods as a new kind of melting pot, a large and disaffected community of blacks, Latin Americans and recent emigres from Iraq, Burundi, Burma and Vietnam.

The apathy comes from "years of disinvestment," he said, "but we [PUSH] were able to buy a house for what I pay a year in parking tickets."

Community activists there have also reclaimed a park the city vacated after an arson, and there's a two-acre entrepreneurial farm for youth.

"And today, you don't have to look out through your window blinds," he said.

Identical twins Randy and Jeff Vines, 33, of St. Louis, have been GLUE adherents since the beginning.

"We've always had a passion for hard luck cities and felt there was an opportunity to collectively promote them," said Jeff Vines.

"They just embody so much potential and character that is untapped and overlooked," said Randy, who with his brother started STL-style.com, a company that designs and markets St. Louis-themed merchandise.

Susan Sheppard, 34, a state preservation officer in Lansing, Mich., said post-industrial cities have the advantage of "great architecture, affordable housing and opportunities for people with little money to really make a difference, which you can't really do in New York or San Francisco."

But many older cities "need to work on better transportation and government that is more welcoming to small business," she said.

"There may be a misperception that we are young creatives moving into empty cities and recreating them," said Ms. Szurpicki at the opening session Thursday. "That is not what GLUE is. We recognize there are a lot of people in these cities who have been doing things already, and we can learn from them."

This GLUE conference was the first to choose a host neighborhood, and Larimer got the nod. GLUE members lauded the bottom-up planning process leading to its rebirth.

Members of the Larimer Consensus Group, including Malik Bankston, executive director of the Kingsley Association, told the conferees how the neighborhood's organizations created a neighborhood plan in 2009.





The consensus group went from "a laborious process of talking about what used to be," he said, to a vision of how to find in the huge vacancy "a sustainable solution that's more specific than 'Let's go green.'" The plan calls for condensed housing to be coordinated with green recreation fields, an expanded community farm, an outdoor community oven and a stage.

Khari Mosley, of Larimer-based GTECH, said the push for a green economy has to include neighborhood streets and political avenues. "Don't allow us," he urged, "to continue to lose the argument in the public square."







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