

LOCATION. LOCATION. LOCATION. Really?

National Site Location Consultants Say that Pittsburgh's Strategic Location – and More – Give the Region Real Advantages

To gain a better understanding of trends, opportunities and challenges and how Pittsburgh could benefit or be impacted, the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance recently hosted a group of national site location consultants in Pittsburgh to showcase for them the latest assets of the region and its economy – with the latter continuing to outperform its 14 benchmark cities in the U.S. While on the ground in Pittsburgh, six of these experts shared their perspectives at the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties (NAIOP) Developers' Showcase. The Developers' Showcase was held at the East End's Bakery Square – the former Nabisco bakery recently recreated as a highly innovative, sustainable, mixed-use development. Panelists included: Charlotte-based **Mark Beattie** with Hickey & Associates, LLC; New Jersey-based **Brian Corde** of Atlas Insight, LLC; Cleveland-based **Jonathan Gemmen** of Austin Consulting; **Jonathan L. Sangster** of CBRE Consulting, based in Atlanta; **Steve Vierck** of Austin-based AngelouEconomics; and **Joseph Vranich** of The Business Relocation Coach, based in California.

Overall national trends that you are seeing, and where does Pittsburgh fit?

Vierck: Many of our clients are international and are seeking ways to increase their global footprint.

Gemmen: There's a focus on green and LEED-certified buildings. Prepared foods and healthy products – those that are organic, green and regionally based – are all growth areas. As the efficiency of solar panel construction is improving, growth opportunities are on the rise for a renewable energy source, such as solar.

“I think the Pittsburgh region has done a very good job ... going after the industries that make sense here: energy and manufacturing, for example, which have a long-standing presence in the region.”

– Brian Corde, Atlas Insight, LLC

Beattie: Corporations are re-evaluating their portfolios. They're figuring out ways to reduce their bottom line operating costs and to keep their overall costs in check. They are determining where they want to be as the economic recovery takes shape. As for how Pittsburgh is doing, I think the region is doing well in retrenching its existing base and establishing a competitive core.

Corde: Call center operations are moving back into the U.S. Following up on what Mark Beattie said about corporate portfolio re-evaluations, I'm also working with clients who want to enhance efficiencies by reducing existing footprints, including less office space and real estate.

I think the Pittsburgh region has done a very good job of playing the cards it has been dealt and going after the industries that make sense here: energy and manufacturing, for example, which have a long-standing presence in the region.

Sangster: The medical and health care sectors are growing ... awesome opportunities that this community [the Pittsburgh region] can build on. Pittsburgh is well positioned to take advantage of these opportunities ... get your message out.

For clients, how important are perception and image, and how does Pittsburgh stack up?

Sangster: Being from Atlanta, I have to say it took about five to seven years after the city hosted the Olympics in 1996 before people realized how great the city actually was. Considering this, Pittsburgh was given an incredible opportunity when it hosted the G-20 summit last year. But it takes time and a lot of hard work before the true potential of this opportunity for the region may be reached.

“Pittsburgh has had a better recovery rate amid the recession than any Californian city. You all must be doing something right. Be proud!”

– Joseph Vranich, The Business Relocation Coach

Beattie: Work toward retaining your base and growing it. Focus on quality incremental growth. The big “home run” deals are not always the answer. Pittsburgh has a very stable labor market, which is an asset. Make us aware of what truly differentiates Pittsburgh, and we’ll take those key messages to our clients on your behalf.

Vranich: Micro-marketing is vitally important for any region looking to attract business investment. This Pittsburgh Regional Alliance tour is the epitome of micro-marketing. If I could bring an executive to this town and have him or her receive the treatment that I have received during my visit, I’m confident that it could really have a significant positive impact on that individual’s decision making.

Corde: Our business is largely data driven. Personal relationships are important, but only after a region makes the shortlist for a project.

Are type and availability of real estate a driving factor in the decision-making process?

Corde: The availability of real estate doesn’t drive the decision-making process for site location. Once a shortlist is established then real estate becomes more important. Then, we, as site location consultants, engage with a regional economic development organization like the PRA.

What impact can we expect the Marcellus Shale to have on our region?

Vranich: It will be big!

Corde: It could potentially redefine the region's economic landscape; businesses will know that this is where it's all happening, and they've got to get in on the opportunity or be totally out. But don't lose sight of the diverse economy that you have here in Pittsburgh. Keep your economy balanced.

Vierck: It will become a stabilizing factor, and it's a great card for Pittsburgh to have to play to its economic growth. But be cautious about becoming too reliant on any one industry.

Parting thoughts?

Vierck: Focus on the "cool city" aspects of Pittsburgh. And as a region, make sure to continue on working to attract and retain high-quality talent, including smart, young people. This will really drive your economy.

Vranich: Just keep this in mind: Pittsburgh has had a better recovery rate amid the recession than any Californian city. You all must be doing something right. Be proud!