

Sports Mania Is a Poor Substitute for Economic Success **There's a reason so many Steeler fans have left Pittsburgh**

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By Jerry Bowyer

Tomorrow the Pittsburgh Steelers square off against the Baltimore Ravens, and the Philadelphia Eagles square off against the Arizona Cardinals. The winners will go head to head on Feb. 1 in Super Bowl XLIII. If there ever was a time to crow about the wonders of rebuilding a city around a professional sports team, this would be it. Three of the four teams remaining in the play-offs hail from cities -- Baltimore, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh -- that in recent years spent billions rebuilding their downtowns around pro sports facilities and other community "anchors."

Except that there's a problem. The teams might be competitive, but the cities definitely are not. All three continue to shrink in population, and have stagnant job markets and crumbling public schools.

Baltimore, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh were prototypes of the economic development fad of the 1990s: government-financed "investments" in economic development. They all practiced what was called "tin cup urbanism" -- the belief that the rest of society owed large taxpayer transfers to the urban cores from which most of us have fled. They all sipped from the same cup: center city stadia, aquaria and subsidized retailia.

Philadelphia practiced "the core, the core, the core" as a development strategy while perfecting the art of the tin cup under the guidance of then Mayor (now Gov.) Ed Rendell in the late 1990s. The feeling in Philadelphia was that the city was being crushed by economic forces outside of its control, and that the country owes cities, owes them big, and should pay up.

We did pay up, although Philadelphia's population declined 4.3% in the 1990s. And we will likely pay much more under Barack Obama's "stimulus" plan to spend hundreds of billions on new infrastructure. But based on experience, we won't see much renewal.

Baltimore's Inner Harbor development was the leader. Huge sums of government money poured into a very small patch of territory. Especially notable was a pricey public aquarium. Development officials claimed that by reviving the urban "core," economic health would return to the region. It didn't. The dawning of the Age of Aquarium has yet to appear.

On my last trip to Baltimore, it didn't take more than a three minute drive from the Inner Harbor before I could see burned-out neighborhoods. When I stopped for gas, I was aggressively panhandled by a man with a gold tooth in which a black ace was etched. Didn't see that guy in the development prospectus.

Pittsburgh followed the pattern, explicitly basing its development model partly on Baltimore and partly on Cleveland (from which Baltimore's football team had fled). The promises -- of "Renaissance III," "turning Pittsburgh back into a major league town again," and "creating a world class city" -- were grandiose. When city officials put the plan -- to spend taxpayer money on rebuilding downtown and subsidizing a stadium -- on the ballot, it got sacked. The referendum was rejected in all 11 counties in the metro area. It was a complete shut-out. Pittsburgh might be a drinking town with a football problem, as they say, but voters said no anyway on that one.

It didn't matter. Despite the referendum results, the city built it all anyway with public money. Then Mayor Tom Murphy and other city officials, as well as state legislators, went ahead. By 2003, two years after the project's completion, Pittsburgh faced bankruptcy.

A U.S. Census report just out shows that Pittsburgh's population has just been surpassed by Toledo, Ohio. Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, 28, the Burg's wunderkind without the wonder, responded this week to the news. He isn't interested in repealing the special tax breaks for favored businesses the city uses to tamp down calls for pro-growth tax cuts, or in demanding more accountability from a school system that spends \$18,000 per-child every year. And he isn't talking about repealing a steep parking tax that socks commuters. He wants a recount from the Census Bureau.

But Pittsburgh has lost half of its population since the 1950s, the decade in which the city imposed its first individual income tax. That was the peak. Since then, each new tax designed to fund public works to "keep our young people here" spurs more and more people to call for a moving van.

Maybe America should take a look at Baltimore, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh before getting behind Mr. Obama's plan to use public-works projects to lead us out of economic morass.

In some ways, the sports mania in these towns is a substitute for genuine economic achievement. Sure the middle class is disappearing. But, hey, how 'bout them Steelers? Football triumphalism is a kind of civic cocaine, creating a sense of accomplishment where the reality is otherwise. (Maybe that's what's behind Western Europe's soccer fanaticism.)

When the Steelers were in the Super Bowl in 2006 I was the host of a radio show in Pittsburgh. I argued that the franchise was an exercise in leadership excellence in a city whose politicians were anything but. Numerous callers hammered me. They said there are a lot of "Steelers" bars across the country, and that proved the city still had some national respect. Indeed, there are hundreds of watering holes dispersed across America loaded with fanatical devotees of the Pittsburgh Steelers. "Where are the Seahawks bars?" the callers asked.

In Seattle, of course. That city has gained population while Pittsburgh lost it. Steelers bars are the visible cultural artifact of a kind of economic diaspora. People in those bars are the refugees who looked at high taxes, union dominance and lousy schools and voted with their feet. They can still root for their favorite team -- from Raleigh, North Carolina. You go South or West to get your bread. The circuses can be watched on cable.

Mr. Bowyer is the chairman of Bowyer Media, a Pennsylvania-based radio and television production company.