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Study: Older cities must build on strengths

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Pennsylvania's struggling cities already have the answer to revive their economies, but most haven't recognized it.

A report released today by the Brookings Institution suggests that cities, with help from states, should use their parks, green spaces, colleges, hospitals and cultural amenities to leverage economic revival and population growth.

The report notes that Scranton has 26 historic sites, four colleges, four medical facilities and three museums. Wilkes-Barre has 14 historic properties, two colleges, seven medical facilities and two museums.

The message has been received loud and clear by Northeastern Pennsylvania cities, Mayor Chris Doherty said. Scranton has worked to improve its public spaces, and a regional project seeks to establish a medical school in the city.

Mr. Doherty, Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry President-elect Todd Vonderheid and state officials will meet today with Gov. Ed Rendell to discuss Brookings' latest observations.

Mr. Vonderheid is also an official with RenewPa, an organization looking to promote recommendations of Washington, D.C.-based Brookings.

Brookings argues that rather than carving subdivisions from forests, it's more cost-effective to direct jobs and population to cities, which already have the roads, utilities and amenities to support more people and businesses.

"Our cities have recently begun to grow again in population," Mr. Doherty said. "Our communities were built for larger populations, so we can handle it."

The national study echoes the themes introduced in the institution's Metropolitan Policy Program's groundbreaking 2005 Back to Prosperity report on Pennsylvania.

For this report, the think tank assessed the economies of 302 cities and spun off the analysis into 50 state assessments, all calling on the state governments to take greater roles in revitalizing older industrial cities.

Of Pennsylvania's 14 cities, 12 were identified as economically weak compared with other cities in the nation, the greatest percentage of any state.

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