

OAKLAND COUNTY

After years of struggling, Pontiac may be on the way to a rebound

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Pontiac — As night fell over the city, teenagers traversed the scratchy overgrown weeds, past a red plywood "Danger, Keep Out" sign, and hoisted one another through a broken window and inside the once elegant but now vacant Elmer R. Webster Elementary school.

They set up their own ragged basketball hoop, then pushed old lunchroom benches into a circle to relax.

"We got no place to go," said one 16-year-old, who calls himself "Batman" — "Cause this our bat cave."

"Pontiac ain't even got a pool," a 15-year-old responded, fanning herself with discarded notebook paper on a blazing hot day.

The city 31 miles north of Detroit was once a place where almost everyone worked the line at the General Motors plant, and some even parked a car they helped make in the driveway. The Pontiac Trans Am was a popular choice.

But after General Motors shut down its plant in 2009 and the local economy crumbled, Pontiac became a "ghost town," a nickname bestowed by a local newspaper after the city said it couldn't even afford the upkeep of its cemeteries.

Soon, homes, schools, recreation centers and downtown's once grand Art Deco theaters were home to squatters and boarded up. The only businesses doing well were pawnshops, residents said.

After years of struggling, Pontiac may finally be on the way to a rebound. As Detroit's downtown real estate prices rose, Pontiac attracted big companies looking for cheap space, local officials say. In 2018, United Wholesale Shore, a mortgage company, opened a 150-acre campus with a Starbucks, hair salon and gyms for its 6,000 employees.

The city's biggest cause for optimism came this year, when the Michigan legislature approved \$50 million for Pontiac to renovate old buildings, remove rubble and redevelop green spaces. The city plans to use some of the money to host outdoor concerts and build bike lanes.

Then Oakland County, where Pontiac has traditionally served at the seat of government, said it would rehab two downtown buildings and bring 600 government jobs back to the city. The county had abandoned its offices there in the 1960s.

"This is a once in a generation opportunity with every level of government — federal, state and county money — investing and putting more attention to Pontiac than we have ever seen," said Mike McGuinness, 29, who grew up here and is now executive director of Oakland County Historical Society and the City Council president.

It won't be an easy task. Pontiac's unemployment rate is more than twice the national average and local officials have discussed paying a national group to help reduce its violent crime.

Far larger than Pontiac, Detroit has also long loomed like an older brother over the city. While Detroit had Motown and Eminem, Pontiac's GM's factory built the flashy muscle cars that appeared in films like "Smokey and the Bandit." The city brags that the bus on which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, a symbol of her defiance against racism, was made there.

Pontiac and Detroit shared a similar boom and bust cycle: Flush during the heyday of car manufacturing and then crashing as jobs disappeared overseas.

But while Detroit's comeback efforts over the past decade gained far more attention, Pontiac, a city of about 60,000, has also been trying to revive itself.

Pontiac residents joke, with some dismay, that their city is "the forgotten bastard stepchild," of Detroit.

"I always felt like there was a black cloud hanging over Pontiac," sighed Andre Jones, who wiped his brow under the relentless sun as he stood on a residential street corner near his home, which 15 years ago was known for what he described as "nothin' but drugs, and prostitution, and homeless folks passed out in vacant houses or in some overgrown weeds."

But now, there is reason to hope, said Jones, pointing to large tented vegetable gardens planted by residents and a local nonprofit. He picks up work watering and weeding the garden.

While Pontiac continues to struggle with a high crime rate, lack of jobs and safe and affordable housing — problems that also are still a reality in large swaths of Detroit — local officials say the stars have finally aligned in Pontiac and they are closer than ever to turning once aspirational ideas into reality.

"Ya know, this place is slowly transforming into a nicer and safer neighborhood now," Jones said, pressing his hands into a prayer symbol. "One day, we might even have our city pools back. That's what I really want to see for our kids."

Urban misadventures

Pontiac —Yak-Town or The Yak, as its known locally — is named after an Ottawa Tribe war chief, who fought against European settlers. But the symbolism of its name has long been replaced by the country's dying auto industry. Now, residents have spent decades trying to redefine itself again, sometimes failing spectacularly.

The year the GM plant closed, the city had a \$6 million budget shortfall and \$100 million in debt. It was ruled by three successive state-appointed emergency financial managers between 2009 and 2015 to stave off bankruptcy.

Oakland County disbanded Pontiac's underfunded police department and contracted out law enforcement services to the county. Pontiac's firefighters were merged with the nearby Waterford Township.

Many residents say they praised those decisions because Pontiac's police department was broke and response times were slow, if they came at all.

Pontiac's population fell 30% from 85,000 in the 1970s, to 60,000 now as many middle class White and Black residents moved to the wealthier suburbs.

The city began to feel like an island of poverty in the center of one of the richest counties in the state, local residents say.

One high-profile effort to revive its prospects turned into an embarrassing boondoggle. In 2009, investors opened a movie studio in the abandoned General Motors plant with the help of government tax credits.

The studio produced a few small films, including "Oz the Great and Powerful," which began shooting in July 2011, but not the hundreds of jobs local officials were hoping for. (One Pontiac resident got to play a body double for Michelle Williams playing Glinda.)

Within two years, the studio announced it was closing and would sell its props, including parts of Oz's yellow brick road.

The city's pride took another hit with the demolition of the Silverdome, which sports broadcaster Howard Cosell described on opening night in 1975 as "the most magnificent football structure of its kind."

The 80,000-seat stadium, former home of the Detroit Lions, had hosted tractor pulls, the 1994 World Cup, and concerts by Madonna (who spent her childhood in Pontiac) and even Elvis. But it fell into disrepair — once, in 1985, parts of the roof fell on Lions players. The stadium, which cost \$55 million to build, was demolished by 2018. In 2021, Amazon opened a new robotics fulfillment center where the Silverdome once stood.

The stadium's collapse was painful for local residents, said Tim Shepard, who grew up attending football games and concerts at the Silverdome in the 1980s and '90s. But, he said, there is still reason for optimism: The Amazon facility is "a significant win for the city with benefits that will continue for years to come."

Is Pontiac ready for revival?

After decades of decay, even jaded residents say they are seeing real improvement, including the reopening of several parks.

"Pontiac has had its ups and downs," said Terry Connolly, 66, who worked for GM's product development in Pontiac City from 1979 to the mid-80s.

Connolly said he hopes to open a full-time "Pontiac Transportation" museum this year to re-instill "pride in the city for the school kids. They get excited about cars and can say, 'Look what my city did.'"

The museum could bring in thousands of visitors a year, he said, pointing to the crowds that showed up to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the two-seater Pontiac Fiero this year.

"There are so many car enthusiasts, and they came and ate in Pontiac restaurants and bars and stayed in Pontiac hotels," he said.

"For me this also about the incredible civic pride this city once had," Connolly said. "We are going to bring that back. People will realize that Pontiac was a hopping place and was like the Silicon Valley of cars, trucks and buses. And it can be a hopping place again."

After college, Coleman Yoakum left Arkansas for Detroit to be apart of the storied city's comeback. But when he arrived in 2011, he realized Pontiac needed more help.

After more than a decade, Yoakum says, he is starting to see real progress. His nonprofit, Micah 6, has built neighborhood-run greenhouses on the west side of the city, filled with tomatoes, peas, peppers, okra, collards and cabbage. They have also opened a small grocery store — the only place to buy fresh vegetables in that part of town without crossing a seven-lane highway, he says.

"It's just so nice here," said Tanya Autrey, 50, who was once homeless and now works at the store. Nearby are stands of snap peas, collard greens, grapefruits and apples. "Before this, we would just eat chips, a Slim Jim and drink a soda at a gas station."

Yoakum and other local activists also have bigger goals, including turning the historic Webster school, which opened in 1920, into a community hub with a grocery store, gym, and programs for children and teens. His nonprofit has already raised \$30 million for the restoration project.

Recently, local skateboarders and cosplay groups asked to film in the former school, which closed in 2007.

"It's this sign that the buzz of coming to a city like Pontiac that's not totally saturated and just crushing your goals and helping the community," Yoakum said. "And Pontiac is on the front lines of that."