

# City Publicity

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Rank, PA is a city on the bottom. The town of 79,000 has a poverty rate of 39 percent. Its tradition of manufacturing dating to the French and Indian War is lost. Steel plants have closed. A truck parts manufacturer moved to Georgia. A telephone equipment maker shut down. Moreover, Rank's workers are unprepared for a high-tech world. Just 10 percent have a bachelor's degree, well below the national average of 28 percent. Employment has continued to fall in the town and the population to shrink. Rank had 88,000 men, women and children in the 2000 census and 79,000 in 2010.

The surviving business community has formed an association to lift Rank from a bottom tier of American cities that include Flint, Michigan, Camden, New Jersey and Brownsville, Texas. The association has been partially successful in getting light manufacturing to take tax credits and locate in shuttered Rank factories, but it is not nearly enough.

The Mayor of Rank, James Earl, is its chief salesman. He has traveled Pennsylvania and the Northeast searching for manufacturers to locate in Rank. None have come, partly because Rank's population is too unskilled to handle CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine tools and to service industrial robots. Moreover, city services have broken down. Rank's schools are near the bottom in the state. The police force suffered a 40 percent cutback. Garbage collection was reduced to one day a week, street sweeping to once a month. Abandoned homes, many of them burned and all of them vandalized, dot blocks of the town. There is no money to tear them down. Water and sewer systems are old and ill-maintained. Weeds grow in medians of rutted streets.

The State of Pennsylvania stepped into Rank for two years from 2004 to 2005 to help straighten out its finances. The mayor at the time went to jail for embezzlement along with two of his cronies. An audit revealed the town's books were in disarray. The controller was fired and an accounting firm brought in to build a better system. Since 2006, Rank has had good financials but the message they convey is depressing. Tax revenues are declining while the city's pension obligations continue to rise.

When Earl took office in 2008, he had no illusions. He wasn't sure he wanted to be mayor in the first place. Sole-owner of a window factory, he employed 200 and was one of the more prominent businessmen in Rank. He had considered moving his factory out of town but stayed out of obligation. His grandfather had founded the business in Rank 90 years before and had always been good to the community. The community in turn had benefitted his business. Earl had commissioned a study when he first entered office to find ways to promote Rank. Its conclusions were bleak. Rank needed to bootstrap the education of its

citizens. It needed to restore key city services. It had to improve its schools. The study recommended that it become a light manufacturing center and that it offer tax credits. The business association was using the study as a basis for development work.

Louise Sterns runs the one-person PR department for Rank. She had laid off a staff of three in previous cutbacks and is today compiling on her own schedules of the Mayor's appearances, the city calendar of events and writing press releases for the *Rank Age*, the town's failing daily newspaper. Sterns is also responsible for updating the Rank web page and for e-mail alerts sent from the mayor's office. Her days run from 8 am to 6 pm with requirements to attend evening events and city council meetings.

Earl holds regular meetings with Sterns to go over city affairs and events and has high regard for her. Sterns, in turn, appreciates the mayor's dedication to an impossible job. The two of them have talked for hours about ways to get the city moving again but the barriers to all their ideas are money and time. Rank doesn't have the funds to promote itself aggressively, and Sterns can't handle any more responsibility than she has.

In a recent annual planning session, the head of the business association asked the Mayor and Stern what the city should do to snap itself out of its funk.

"We need something big, something defining, something that will make a difference from one year to the next and gives Rank a direction," the head of the business association said.

"A city-wide event?" the mayor asked.

"Something like that but it needs to go beyond Rank. We need to use whatever it is as a calling card."

The mayor looked at Stern.

"Whatever it is should attack underlying problems," said Stern. "Bread and circuses only go so far."

The mayor and the head of the business association nodded.

"A city clean-up day?" the head of the business association ventured.

"Something like that."

"Or a city-wide education day?" said Stern.

"How so?"

“Perhaps a day-long conference in which principals, teachers and community college heads confer under the banner of the city. Each year, we set goals for improvement and measure success from the previous year. We invite the public to contribute and observe.”

“A good idea. We could hold it in the conference center, record it, put speeches on the web page.”

“What would it take to do either of the ideas?”

“A tremendous amount of organization and promotion,” said Stern. “I’m not sure how either could get done.”

They discussed some more, threw out more ideas and left the issue unresolved. Two days later, Stern was meeting with Earl to go over the calendar. Earl had been thinking about the discussion.

“Louise, I could order 10,000 brooms, or I could go see the Board of Education. I’m not sure what would make sense.”

“Whatever direction we pick we have to commit to for years until change takes hold. That has to be one of the criteria.”

“How do we guarantee it would continue once I’m out of office?”

“The idea has to be so important that no one would want to change it, and you have to stay in office long enough for it to become embedded.”

The mayor pondered and said nothing.

Later, Stern received an e-mail message from Earl. It directed her to talk quietly to the heads of the board of education and city sanitation department to see what they might think. Inquiries should be “trial balloons.” Stern was to promise nothing.

The head of the board of education was enthusiastic. A city-wide event focusing on schools and jump-starting learning was just what was needed. He offered the board’s full support.

The head of the department of sanitation was equally positive. He saw a chance of organizing business and citizens to clean streets, remove abandoned houses and paint buildings. He emphasized that a more inviting looking city would help convince business to move there.

Stern reporter her findings to Earl and copied the head of the business association. She received an e-mail back from the mayor. "What would you do?" it asked.

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Questions for discussion:

1. If you were Stern, what would you advise?
2. How would you go about researching the best course?
3. What approach is more likely to affect the city positively in the long run?
4. Is Rank beyond hope?