

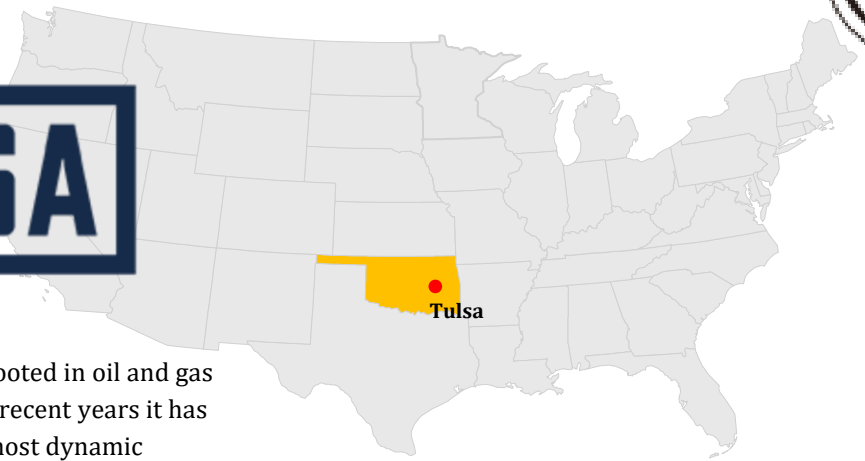
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Industrial Heritage Paves the Way for a Technology-Driven Future

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Tulsa, Oklahoma, has a history rooted in oil and gas and aerospace industries, but in recent years it has rapidly evolved into one of the most dynamic innovation hubs among mid-sized U.S. cities. Driving this transformation is a meticulously designed strategy spearheaded by the City of Tulsa. Combining smart infrastructure investment, talent development, and comprehensive growth policies, it aims for sustainable economic development. At the heart of this effort is Erran Persley, Tulsa's Chief Economic Development Officer. Washington CORE spoke with Persley about Tulsa's challenges and future vision from a global perspective.

Persley likens Tulsa's economic strategy to the words of legendary hockey player Wayne Gretzky: "Go where the puck is going, not where it has been." For Tulsa, that future lies in autonomous systems, AI, and advanced manufacturing. The city is making early and aggressive investments to build global competitiveness.

Historical Industrial Base Supports New Growth

The oil and gas industry, which has long underpinned Tulsa's economy, remains a major sector, supported by a skilled workforce and robust supply chains. Industry giants like Williams Companies, ONEOK, and Magellan Midstream have maintained long-standing headquarters in Tulsa, forming the backbone of the traditional energy economy.

Meanwhile, the city is actively embracing the new energy transition. Clean data infrastructure company Crusoe Energy is expanding its operations in Tulsa, drawn by low-cost, stable power and a collaborative local environment. Norway's Norsun also chose Tulsa as the manufacturing base for its low carbon microsilicon wafers for solar panels.

Furthermore, Tulsa's aerospace industry dates back to the Apollo program era. It was once involved in

rocket design and manufacturing, building a robust airport ecosystem centered around American Airlines' maintenance hub. Today, that legacy is evolving in new ways. For example, Colorado-based Agile Space Industries was drawn to Tulsa's engineering talent and aerospace supply chain, launching production of rocket thrusters in the city. With over 1,000 aerospace companies operating within the state, Tulsa has firmly established itself as an "aerospace hub connecting history and the future."

Apollo 13 – Tulsa Air and Space Museum 55th Anniversary Celebration



Source: Tulsa Air and Space Museum ¹

Leadership in Autonomous Systems and Drones

Tulsa has gained national recognition as a leading hub in the rapidly growing field of autonomous systems and drone testing. In July 2024, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) designated Tulsa as the "Tulsa Hub for Equitable and Trustworthy Autonomy (THETA)," now known as Tulsa Tech Hub.

This designation accelerated investments in infrastructure, testing environments, and industry partnerships.

Tulsa Tech Hub Designation Announcement



Source: Tulsa Innovation Labs

Tulsa's geographic characteristics also serve as a strength for drone testing. Its ability to quickly traverse both urban and rural areas provides an environment nationwide for testing drones under diverse conditions. Additionally, Switzerland's WindShape established a cutting-edge drone testing facility in Tulsa capable of simulating weather conditions like wind, temperature, and turbulence. Furthermore, a tribal partnership with the Osage Nation supports this ecosystem through joint development of autonomous flight-testing infrastructure, such as drone ports.

WindShape Drones



Source: WindShape³

Three Key Elements Align: Location, Logistics, Low-Carbon Power

While direct incentives in Tulsa may be fewer compared to major cities, its geographic and operational advantages are exceptional. The inland waterway ports of Catoosa and Inola, directly connected to the Gulf of Mexico, enable barge shipping to global markets, offering cost efficiency unusual for a mid-sized inland city.

Port of Catoosa



Source: Waterways Journal⁴

Inola Port



Source: Tulsa Ports⁵

Tulsa is also attracting attention as a data center hub, backed by electricity prices 20-30% below the national average and a stable supply of green power. An \$800 million data infrastructure project is currently underway.

Human Resource Development for Companies

Tulsa is also developing programs to help workers master new technologies that are rapidly entering the workplace. In cooperation with vocational training schools, it is working to improve the skills of the workforce sought by local companies. Tulsa Tech and Tulsa Community College offer curricula in cybersecurity, industrial wiring, and autonomous systems. There are also specific pathways for trainees to find employment with local companies. For example, Crusoe Energy has developed a certified industrial wiring program in partnership with Tulsa Tech, opening the door for graduates to be hired directly at the company's advanced facilities. Furthermore, in March 2025, Zone Academy secured an \$8.2 million grant from them to expand its technology education using AI and VR. By recreating industrial assembly lines and surgical environments in virtual spaces, it enhances learning efficiency in workforce development.

A Mechanism for Generating New Businesses

The collaborative relationships among various stakeholders are driving the city's economic vitality. For example, the city's economic development agency, PartnerTulsa, holds weekly meetings with the Chamber of Commerce, private foundations, and others to share goals and coordinate resources. This collaborative governance structure contributes to faster investment decisions and smoother project implementation. It has secured over \$2 billion in new investments since 2023 and facilitated the construction of over 300,000 square feet of new advanced manufacturing facilities.

It also symbolizes Tulsa's comprehensive approach integrating education, technology, housing, and community development through initiatives like Tulsa Innovation Labs (supporting new technology development), Tulsa Remote (attracting remote talent), and Atlas School (providing programming education). The startup ecosystem is also thriving, with Gradient at its core—a government-certified incubator, rare even in the U.S. It strengthens support for entrepreneurs in biomedicine, clean energy, and applied AI, serving over 1,500 people daily and ranking among the nation's largest.

Pioneering the Future From the Heartland

Inclusion is ingrained in Tulsa's growth strategy. In the Greenwood district, known as "Black Wall Street" and the site of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, Black Tech Street, an organization aiming to build a Black technology and innovation ecosystem, has partnered with Microsoft to establish a free AI training center. It provides technology support to the Black community.

Tulsa is also widely known as the birthplace of the Mother Road, and in 2026, it will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Route 66 with cultural projects such as public art, historical preservation, and tourism campaigns. As a result, Tulsa is not only a leading city of innovation but also increasing its presence as a cultural hub.

It is no coincidence that Tulsa is emerging as a 21st-century innovation city. The Heartland's advantage stems from the synergy of affordable, clean infrastructure, a workforce capable of embracing advanced technologies, and a uniquely balanced governance model. Tulsa's challenge—to anticipate "the next wave of change" and pursue inclusive, sustainable growth—presents a new urban model emerging from America's Heartland. Maximizing its legacy industrial base while co-creating with technology to forge ahead—that is Tulsa's vision. Innovation doesn't originate solely in Boston or Silicon Valley. For global corporations and innovators recognizing the "Heartland Advantage," Tulsa presents a new option.

Route 66



Source: Drager Creative⁸

Sources

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Interviewee



Erran Persley

As Chief Economic Development Officer for the City of Tulsa, Erran oversees coordination with the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce and economic development agency PartnerTulsa. He holds an MBA from Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.) and ESADE Business School (Barcelona, Spain) and majored in Political Science at Howard University.

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