

It's Not Just Silicon Valley

Tulsa's Digital Ecosystem
Leads the Midwest's Revival

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Tulsa, Oklahoma—once a city symbolizing the boom-and-bust cycle of the oil and gas industry—is now undergoing a major economic transformation. The metropolitan area has a population of about 1 million, with roughly 410,000 residents within the city limits. While population decline had persisted in recent years, mirroring broader Midwest trends, recent data shows a shift toward growth. Behind this shift lies the existence of a remote attraction program called "Tulsa Remote." Over 3,800 remote workers have relocated to Tulsa from areas with soaring housing and living costs, with many settling permanently beyond their initial planned stay. Tulsa accounts for the largest share of the state's overall population growth, with notable inflows particularly from California and Texas. Through investments in digital infrastructure and community-focused innovation initiatives, Tulsa is redefining a new model demonstrating how a mid-sized city can thrive in the 21st century.

At its core are three institutions: "Tulsa Remote," which attracts remote workers; "Atlas School," which trains digital talent; and "Tulsa Innovation Labs," which shapes the city's tech strategy. Washington Core spoke with these organizations to explore how Tulsa is rebuilding its economic identity and establishing itself as a hub where history and innovation intersect.

From Oil Boom Town to Digital Hub

In the early 20th century, Tulsa rose as the "Oil City," tied to major oil companies like Williams and ONEOK. Later, it added an American Airlines maintenance hub, establishing itself as an aerospace and industrial city supporting employment for thousands. However, like many other industrial cities, it experienced economic decline due to fluctuations in the energy market and the decline of manufacturing.

Nevertheless, Tulsa chose a path of reconstruction, leveraging its industrial heritage. Clean energy companies, aerospace startups, and digital infrastructure are developing on the foundation of existing industries, shaping a new industrial structure. One example is "Project Anthem," planned for eastern Tulsa. A \$800 million data center campus is slated for construction on a 340-acre site—equivalent to roughly 30 Tokyo Domes. Leveraging the region's strength of electricity rates 20-30% below the U.S. average, such projects position Tulsa as a cost-competitive alternative to coastal hubs like Boston and Silicon Valley.

Tulsa Remote Attracting Talent and Transforming the City's Image

Driving this transformation is the city's remote workforce strategy. Launched in 2018 by the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF), "Tulsa Remote" began as a program offering \$10,000 relocation grants, coworking spaces, and community connection



The Tulsa Remote Community:
Hub "36 Degrees North"
Source: Tulsa Remote³

support to attract remote workers. Starting with just 70 participants, over 3,800 remote workers have now relocated to Tulsa, making it a nationally recognized talent attraction model. Many come from high-cost areas like California and New York. With an average age of 35 and average annual income of approximately \$130,000, they bring significant purchasing power to the local economy. Furthermore, as many participants relocate with family or partners, this has positively impacted the city's demographic composition.

Tulsa Remote emphasizes not just relocation support but becoming a resident of the community. Each participant is assigned a mentor, aiming not just for temporary relocation, but for integration into the community, fostering a sense of belonging, and

becoming residents who contribute locally. Justin Harlan of Tulsa Remote explains: "We're not just attracting talent. We're thinking together about what it means to 'belong' in this city. Building community with neighbors and local people from day one. That sense of connection is what's leading relocators to settle down."

In fact, over 75% of participants continue living in Tulsa beyond their one-year commitment period, deepening their ties through home purchases, business startups, and engagement with local culture. By attracting entrepreneurial talent, Tulsa Remote cultivates a foundation of networks and community, helping stem population decline and enabling sustainable urban revitalization.

Justin Harlan leads "Experience Tulsa," a comprehensive talent initiative that attracts people to Tulsa and supports them in contributing to the entire city, thereby fostering settlement. In this role, Justin spearheads "Tulsa Remote," a program selected for Fast Company's "World's Most Innovative Companies" list in 2022. The program was recognized for its unique approach to attracting remote workers to Tulsa and driving the city's economic development.



Atlas School

Cultivating Digital Talent

While Tulsa Remote focuses on "attraction," the Atlas School focuses on "development." Founded in 2019 with support from GKFF, it offers a 20-month intensive program in software development, embedded systems, and machine learning.

"Tulsa lacked a state-run four-year university offering foundational technical education, creating a gap in the talent pipeline from higher education to employment," explains Executive Director Libby Ediger. Atlas School developed a practical curriculum directly connecting to high-quality tech jobs.

Over 250 students have graduated so far, with 75% staying in Tulsa to work across diverse industries including aerospace, energy, finance, and manufacturing. Local financial institutions and aerospace companies actively recruit Atlas School graduates, while some alumni have launched startups with support from public incubators like Gradient.

Atlas School's defining feature is its comprehensive talent

Libby Ediger, CEO of Atlas School, leads the development of next-generation talent. She previously contributed to the growth and expansion of a Washington, D.C.-based SaaS company and was selected for Oklahoma Magazine's "40 Under 40." Centered on education, innovation, and community contribution, she is actively involved in civic activities and multiple business-related boards.



Classroom Scene at Atlas School
Source: Atlas School⁴

development that extends beyond technical education. It emphasizes not only programming skills but also teamwork, research capabilities, and communication skills, aiming to cultivate collaborative professionals rather than mere technicians.

Atlas' ethos, "be from Tulsa, train in Tulsa, build in Tulsa," in collaboration with Tulsa Remote, has formed a talent pool that supports Tulsa's digital economy with talent from outside and locally.

Tulsa Innovation Labs

Shaping the City's Tech Strategy

While Tulsa Remote focuses on talent attraction and Atlas School handles development, Tulsa Innovation Labs (TIL) charts the path for entrepreneurship and industrial growth. Established in 2020 by GKFF, TIL identifies growth opportunities through data analysis and builds the foundation for Tulsa to establish leadership in those areas.

"Our approach is always data-driven," says Jennifer Hankins

of TIL. "What are the areas where Tulsa can realistically lead in the next 10 to 15 years? That question led us to identify focus areas like energy tech, advanced aerospace mobility, and advanced manufacturing."

As a result of this strategy, Tulsa was designated a federal "Tech Hub" in 2023, securing \$51 million in funding. Under TIL, the Tulsa Tech Hub is advancing the development of autonomous systems and centers around its core initiative of becoming a hub that fosters new industries in fields like drone technology and advanced manufacturing.

It leverages Tulsa's strengths—its manufacturing base and vast geographic environment—while prioritizing the reliability and fairness of autonomous systems. International partnerships are also progressing steadily. Swiss drone company Windshape established a base in Tulsa through collaboration with TIL. Additionally, TIL's Rose Rock Bridge program has accelerated over 30 energy companies, including proof-of-concept projects with

corporations, such as H&P, Devon Energy, Williams, and ONEOK.

TARMAC (Tulsa Advanced Research for Manufacturing and Aerospace Center) is a regional hub advancing R&D in advanced manufacturing and aerospace. Universities, businesses, and government agencies collaborate here, bridging Tulsa's industrial heritage to future technologies. These efforts link innovation with industrial resilience, enhancing the region's competitiveness.

Furthermore, TIL prioritizes workforce development. By partnering with local universities, Tulsa Community College, and Atlas School to proactively address local labor needs, it aligns with Tulsa's broader growth strategy.

Tulsa as a New U.S. Innovation Model

Tulsa Remote, Atlas School, and Tulsa Innovation Labs (TIL) each have distinct missions yet operate in close coordination. Atlas School graduates enter the industries supported by TIL, while Tulsa Remote participants expand their networks and community engagement opportunities through both entities. Through regular meetings and shared governance, "talent



TIL's Autonomous Delivery Robot
Source: TIL⁵

attraction," "talent development," and "industry growth" mutually reinforce each other, boosting the city's overall vitality.

These initiatives are enabled by GKFF's financial resources and philanthropy-driven vision, demonstrating that innovation can thrive outside major cities dominated by tech giants and prestigious universities.

Once known as the "Oil City" and an "Aerospace Hub," the city is now expanding into a center for digital infrastructure, sustainable energy, and advanced manufacturing. This evolution proves that

mid-sized cities can establish new positions in the digital economy by leveraging their historical legacy, philanthropy, and strategic planning.

Challenges remain, of course. Population growth is slow, and competition for tech talent is intensifying. Yet Tulsa's journey embodies not merely adaptation to change, but the vision of a city that actively shapes its own future. American innovation is now steadily being woven together in the factories, classrooms, and startup hubs of the Midwest—by talent drawn from near and far.

Jennifer Hankins serves as TIL's Managing Director. She joined as a founding member in January 2020. Leveraging over a decade of economic development experience, she has defined TIL's strategic direction and organizational mission while uniting stakeholders across multiple industries. She leads a dynamic, high-performing team responsible for advancing a broad portfolio of initiatives.



Endnote

1. <https://www.gkff.org/stories/tulsa-shines-as-a-top-destination-for-remote-talent>
2. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2025/03/23/what-america-can-learn-from-tulsa/>
3. <https://www.tulsaremote.com/>
4. <https://www.atlasschool.com/news/the-blackrock-foundation-awards-grant-to-atlas-school-expanding-services-that-reduce-barriers-to-enrollment-and-drive-student-success-mar25>
5. <https://www.kjrh.com/news/local-news/oaire-demonstrates-first-responders-utilizing-robotic>

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