

Version Saclay (2h)

Lapdances to lattes

Williston is looking good these days. On the back of oil fracking, wages are soaring. The traffic jams and rutted roads of recent years have gone, replaced by gleaming tarmac. Efforts to draw in more youngsters have been slow, but new brew-pubs and decent coffee bars are helping. Costly living still deters some, but prices have fallen from their previous Manhattan levels.

However, Williston has had trouble keeping its public-sector employees. No sooner does the city train a fork-lift driver, say, than an oil firm scoops him up. Perhaps as many as 2,000 jobs, public and private, are vacant in a city of just 26,000. Service-focused firms are most stretched. Supermarkets want to expand but cannot fill shifts. Starting wages in local shops are a hefty \$17 an hour.

The city's difficulty, environmental damage aside, is how to take long-term advantage. Early this decade Williston won an ugly reputation as a Wild West sort of place. It was the main hub for transient, cash-rich young men who toiled on oil rigs, drove lorries and bunked in Portacabin mancamps. Inevitably it also drew sex workers and drug dealers, and saw a spate of crime, including shootings, especially in bars.

That image threatened to put off non-oil business and also to deter female migrants. So the city is trying hard to rebrand from Wild to Mild West. Residents remain young and rich, with a median age of 31 and average household income of \$90,900. But the strip clubs are gone—instead a trampoline park is a much-hyped popular attraction. City officials dream of attracting big brand retailers, tapping hydropower from the Missouri river to run data centres, or using natural gas to power manufacturing plants. The result, however, is that public debts are soaring again, and officials worry about servicing them.

The Economist, November 22nd, 2018