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Entrepreneurs snap up Western Pa.'s towns

By **Jennifer Reeger**
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Sunday, April 8, 2007

For as little as \$5, any aspiring entrepreneur with a computer can purchase the city of Arnold, or O'Hara Township, or the whole state of Pennsylvania.

Across the globe, people are buying and selling buildings and landmarks, cities and states on [Weblo.com](#).

In this region, virtual replicas of real towns -- Plum, New Kensington, Fox Chapel, Murrysville, Apollo, Tarentum and Lower Burrell -- have been purchased.

Weblo.com is part game, part investment because people use real money to make purchases.

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Sean Morrow, director of marketing for the Montreal-based company, said people build profiles on Weblo.com much like they would on other social networking sites such as MySpace.

"People have been building profiles for ages, and it's only been companies making the

money," he said. "Our whole model has been based on why can't people do that and be paid."

Morrow said the idea is that people should be paid for their user-generated content.

People can purchase towns and famous landmarks or can register a celebrity site, which is free. They can purchase real Web domain names on Weblo.com as well.

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The site, which launched last year, has about 17,000 registered users. More than 6,000 cities around the world have been sold, about half in the United States.

What buyers do with their sites is up to them, but many people are putting up photos, videos and blogs. They're posting information about the city and putting up ads from businesses.

Towns start out at \$5, but, depending on real world population statistics and hits on the town's site, the price can go up.

Business is the reason John Roden, virtual mayor of Apollo, Murrysville, Rehoboth Beach, Del., and Stratford-Upon-Avon, and Rugby, England, decided to join Weblo.com

Roden, 50, is chief information officer for Pittsburgh advertising agency Blattner Brunner and is responsible for its interactive Web counterpart, bbdigital.

He bought towns on Weblo.com that he is familiar with. He lives in Washington Township, and has an Apollo mailing address. He grew up in Rugby, England, and lived in Stratford for a time. He frequently visits Rehoboth Beach.

Roden said his company is always looking at new technology, particularly social networking.

"I want to use it as a business tool. So, for our clients, it would be nice to buy the town they're in, buy the building they're in and use it as a tool for advertising," Roden said.

He bought a few towns he knows to try it out. He hasn't done much with his sites yet.

"I was more interested in what Weblo was going to grow into so I've been waiting for it to grow more," he said.

Suzanne Calpas has never been to Pittsburgh, but she rules it -- virtually.

Calpas, 39, of Prince George, British Columbia, bought Pittsburgh -- and the title of mayor -- for \$300 on March 23.

Soon, Pittsburgh's citizens will be paying her taxes. And, one day, she might turn around and sell it for a profit.

But so far, she's happy with her purchase.

"There's a lot of other cities that are for sale for thousands," she said. "This was a good price for a good city."

Las Vegas recently resold for \$2,300 -- a \$1,970 profit for the original owner. The state of California just sold for \$53,000. Virtual Pennsylvania is up for grabs at about \$17,000.

Mayors of towns and governors of states earn money based on the number of Weblo.com members who live in those areas in the real world. They can make money on ads the company funnels to their sites.

"There's a lot of people that are doing this from an investment perspective," Morrow said.

For Calpas, Weblo is a hobby -- one she hopes to make money with.

Her \$300 purchase of Pittsburgh was her largest. She was looking for a major U.S. city to add to her collection of 45.

"It's a good hockey city, it's got some major league ball teams, some Fortune 500 companies, so there's a lot of potential for people to build in Pittsburgh," Calpas said.

So far, she's made a few hundred real dollars on her virtual investments.

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"There's just something fun about it because you get to talk to other people too," Calpas said.

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