
Cuban diplomat promotes trade opportunities while in Pittsburgh

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The head of Cuba's diplomatic interest section in Washington was in Pittsburgh the past two days meeting with business and academic groups, taking in a little baseball, and hoping to promote a continuing thaw in a relationship still profoundly chilled a generation after the end of the Cold War.

Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Forest Hills, invited Ambassador Jose R. Cabanas to visit the city.

In a meeting with Post-Gazette editors Tuesday, Mr. Cabanas promoted the potential for trade and commerce that could follow some future change in the ties between the two wary neighbors. He holds the diplomatic rank of ambassador, but the U.S. and Cuba do not officially exchange ambassadors. Instead, diplomats such as Mr. Cabanas operate under the umbrella of the two capitals' Swiss embassies.

He described offshore drilling as one huge opportunity in the near future. Alluding to the renewed surge of young undocumented immigrants on the southern border, he said that only measures to spread prosperity more broadly in Central American and the smaller islands of the Caribbean would contain such unregulated immigration.

"There's the danger of lost opportunity," he said.

There is trade between the counties, but since the Kennedy administration, a variety of legislation, notably the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, has sharply restricted it. Mr. Cabanas acknowledged that political circumstances, including the influence of a Florida Cuban community strongly critical of Havana's human rights record, don't suggest the likelihood of any imminent change in the geopolitical realities. He said he is optimistic that attitudes of younger citizens of both countries will set the stage for closer ties in the future.

"What I have found this time is completely different from what I have found before," he said, emphasizing that he was not comparing the attitudes of Washington administrations but the attitudes of ordinary Americans he encounters in a variety of unofficial contexts.

Mr. Cabanas had dinner Monday evening in Pittsburgh with Mr. Doyle and met public officials including county Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Mayor Bill Peduto. The rest of his Pittsburgh itinerary included a stop at Carnegie Mellon University and meeting with a variety of business executives.

Former U.S. Rep. Ron Klink, who accompanied the group, said he hoped the trip would pave the way for future contacts including a trade mission to Cuba for local officials and business leaders in October.

Asked whether he were considering the potential trade mission, Mr. Fitzgerald said, "We are looking at it if there are economic opportunities for our companies."
