

America's dreamtown

Bozeman edges Jackson, Wyo., in trade publication study for quality of life, business growth

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The American dream is right out your front door. That's according to a major trade publication that ranked Bozeman No. 1 in the nation for "quality of life" among micropolitan areas.

Bozeman, dubbed the top "dreamtown" by Bizjournals.com., scored points for its growing, educated population and strong small-business sector.

"People are not going to start a small business unless there is a strong underlying economy," said Bizjournals project editor Scott Thomas, who pointed out that the greater Bozeman area added 1,000 small businesses between 1998 and 2003.

While the survey was business heavy, it also factored in categories such as income and affordable housing — in which Bozeman lagged behind other cities.

Jackson Hole, Wyo., filled the second spot and shares the Gallatin Valley's expensive real estate market.

"But these places tend to overcome that to do well," Thomas said about the list.

The rate at which Bozeman is adding small businesses — a 27.7 percent growth rate between 1998 and 2003 — elevated it to the top of the list.

David Smith, president of the Bozeman Chamber of Commerce, sees evidence of that growth at his office. The local chamber is the largest in the state with 1,135 business members, most of which employ fewer than 99 people.

Smith credited the strong business climate to local entrepreneurs willing to take risks and a "clustering" of small tech businesses.

"We also have a broader base of small businesses," Smith said. "So we're not hitched to one particular industry or employer."

Nonetheless, he said it would be "short-sighted" to say Bozeman is ideal for every entrepreneur. People interested in setting up shop here are told about the high housing prices and limited work force, Smith said.

And by no means does the ranking mean operating a small business in Bozeman is easy.

NATION'S TOP TEN 'DREAMTOWNS'

The following is a list of Bizjournals' top 10 "dreamtowns." Seven of the top 10 are located in the West.

1. Bozeman
2. Jackson, Wyo.
3. Durango, Colo.
4. Easton, Md.
5. Laramie, Wyo.
6. Edwards, Colo.
7. Kill Devil Hills, N.C.
8. Pierre, S.D.
9. Silverthorne, Colo.
10. Los Alamos, N.M.

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"Once you've owned a small business, you think no one will ever work as hard as you do," said Susan Neubauer, who opened the Fresco Cafe, a New York-style deli on North Seventh Avenue, with her husband, Bill, a year ago.

After initially struggling, she said, "we have a good solid following at this point. Our regular customers tend to be those who support local business rather than bigger chain establishments."

Rob Goodwin, president and chief operating officer at the pharmaceutical company

Ligocyte, emphasized the proximity to Montana State University as a business incentive in Gallatin County.

When not tapping into the local market, Goodwin said it's easy to recruit highly trained employees to the area.

Goodwin said he employs 50 people and "we have no plans of ever leaving."

Bizjournals printed its finding in the dozens of trade magazines it owns across the country in cities such as Denver and Seattle.

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