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Pittsburgh ranked tops in U.S. by The Economist

British magazine gives city a jolly good No. 1 rating

Wednesday, June 10, 2009
By Mackenzie Carpenter, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato was calling -- no, crowing -- from his cell phone, in full, gleeful, salesman-for-the-region mode, ticking off the number of recent surveys declaring Pittsburgh the nation's most livable city (four or five); the number of front-page New York Times stories about Pittsburgh in the past three months (two) and the value of such publicity to the Pittsburgh area (priceless).

Given that abundance of good publicity, the news that Pittsburgh once again is the most livable city in the United States -- and 29th worldwide -- in a 2009 survey by British magazine The Economist was "great news, but not a surprise," Mr. Onorato said.

"This is now the fourth or fifth independent survey from outside the region talking up the Pittsburgh metro region. You have the stories in The New York Times, the president picks us to host the G-20 summit, now you have this magazine, plus others over the years. It's amazing."

The Economist Intelligence Unit -- which publishes numerous surveys and studies for paying clients -- has ranked Pittsburgh first in U.S. livability ratings since it started measuring them in 2005, said Jon Copestake, editor of the survey.

Of the 140 cities considered, Vancouver, B.C., took the top spot worldwide, followed by Vienna, Melbourne and Toronto. Cities in Asia and Africa fared the worst, with Harare, Zimbabwe, followed by Algiers and Dhaka, Bangladesh (tied), thanks to "civil instability and poor infrastructure," the report said.

Reader forum
Is Pittsburgh the country's most livable city? Why or why not? Share your comments in our [reader forum](#).

The Economist's ranking is just one of many kudos Pittsburgh has earned recently: In 2007 it was rated as "America's Most Livable City" by Places Rated Almanac, and in January Forbes Magazine cited it as the sixth best city in "Ten Cities For Job Growth In 2009."

Of course, there was that survey by the Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends project, which found Pittsburgh one of the least popular of places to live -- in the bottom 10 of 30 cities surveyed -- with only 17 percent of those surveyed saying they wanted to live there. And Business Week magazine reported that Pittsburgh is the 14th "Most Unhappy City" in the nation.

In The Economist's report, between 30 to 40 indicators were considered under five categories:

stability, health care, culture and environment, education and infrastructure. The Economist used its own analysts plus statistics and input from correspondents in each city.

"The idea was that the city presenting the least challenges to your lifestyle would be deemed the most livable," said Mr. Copestake -- in other words, cities that aren't too big, too crowded or too crime-ridden. Pittsburgh's medical centers and its cultural amenities -- unusual for a city of its size -- helped propel it up the charts, he added.

The actual differences in scores between U.S. cities was fairly small, he noted. "All of the cities in the U.S. are comparable in livability terms," he said, noting that the lowest scoring city, Lexington, Ky., at 85 percent, was only a few points lower than Pittsburgh, at 92 percent.

While Mr. Copestake obviously hasn't experienced our famous tunnel traffic, he noted that because of our population loss, "that means less people needing services so they're not overburdened."

And that's exactly the problem with these "most livable" contests, countered Jake Haulk, president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

"Livability is in the eye of the beholder," he said, noting surveys tend to overvalue cultural institutions -- which benefit relatively few people -- and undervalue economic indicators such as job growth and low taxes, which benefit many. Places like Charlotte, N.C., attracted people for that reason, he said.

"I would think that livability would have to do with finding a good job. If you're just looking at cultural things, sure, Pittsburgh is a nice place to live, if you can afford to send your kids to private schools or live in the suburbs and pay high taxes for good schools, but people tend to go where they can find work."

Nonsense, said Mr. Onorato.

"No one is claiming Pittsburgh is perfect," he said, noting that Mr. Haulk "bragged a few years ago about how great Charlotte is, and now Charlotte is in total collapse."

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Livability

BEST IN THE WORLD:

- 1 Vancouver, B.C.
- 2 Vienna, Austria
- 3 Melbourne, Australia
- 4 Toronto, Canada
- 5 Perth, Australia
- 6 Calgary, Canada
- 7 Helsinki, Finland
- 8 Geneva, Switzerland
- 9 Sydney, Australia
- 10 Zurich, Switzerland

29 Pittsburgh*

*Best in the U.S.

WORST IN THE WORLD:

- 140 Harare, Zimbabwe
- 138 Algiers, Algeria
- 137 Dhaka, Bangladesh
- 137 Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea
- 136 Lagos, Nigeria
- 135 Karachi, Pakistan
- 134 Douala, Cameroon
- 133 Kathmandu, Nepal
- 132 Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
- 131 Dakar, Senegal

Source: The Economist

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