

Place + Happiness = Portland Prosperity

<http://www.oregonlive.com/commentary/oregonian/index.ssf?/base/editorial/1209068703240540.xml&coll=7>

Sunday, April 27, 2008

RICHARD FLORIDA

Over the past decade or so, greater Portland has developed a well-deserved reputation as one of the nation's very best places to live. That's important because people today increasingly get to choose where to live.

Some 40 million Americans move each year, and 15 million of us make a significant move -- to another county, another state or another country. In fact, the place we choose to live is the most important decision we ever make, largely because it influences and shapes all the others: from job opportunities and career options to our investments, the friends we make, the people we date, the mates we ultimately choose and the way we raise our families.

The Portland region stacks up well, according to the large-scale Place and Happiness Survey I conducted with the Gallup Organization, a process involving detailed telephone interviews with more than 27,000 people -- a representative cross section of racial, ethnic, income, occupational and other demographic dimensions -- in 8,000 communities nationwide. The survey asked detailed questions about the effect of the places we live on people's happiness and psychological well-being and probed the key factors that lead them to be happy in their communities.

The survey found that where you live is a key component of a triangle of happiness along with job and personal life. It also found five characteristics of a place that matter to happiness. First, the basics matter -- schools, health care, affordable housing, roads and public transportation. Second, physical and economic security -- crime and safety, jobs, opportunity and a healthy economy. Third, leadership -- the quality of both public and private (business and civic) leaders and the ability for people to plug into their communities and contribute.

Greater Portland scores high in all of these. While there's room for improvement, Portland's public schools are still among the best of America's big cities. Home prices have climbed but are still affordable by West Coast standards. TriMet, Max and the Portland Streetcar are a national model for public transportation. Portland and Oregon's politics are remarkably open and accessible.

More striking, the Portland region is a standout on two other key happiness criteria: openness and quality of place.

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We asked people, "How would you rate your city as a place to live for the following kinds of people: Families with children, racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, immigrants, seniors, people living below poverty, young singles, and recent college graduates looking for work." And with every amount of tolerance extended to these groups, the overall happiness of the community increased. Not because we value diversity as an abstract value, but because many people are drawn to open communities on the assumption that these are places where they can be themselves.

The Portland area's foreign-born population more than tripled in the 1990s, from roughly 87,200 in 1990 to 264,400 in 2006, from 6.9 percent to 12.4 percent of the total population, according to the U.S. Census. Portland also climbed in the ranks of cities with the most gay couples, from No. 10 in 1990 to No. 4 in 2006. Portland also ranks eighth among cities in growth of 25- to 34-year-olds and fourth in that age group with college degrees.

This kind of openness has been a powerful draw for Portland, putting it on the map as an indie-rock magnet, according to a 2007 article in Slate by Taylor Clark. "Sonically," Clark writes, "there's not a whole lot that the twisty pop of the Shins has in common with the 'hyper-literate prog-rock' (to borrow a phrase from Stephen Colbert) of the Decemberists. You might see Sleater-Kinney drummer Janet Weiss parking her Volvo station wagon in front of Stumptown Coffee Roasters, for instance, but you seldom feel these luminaries exerting any influence on the local music landscape. They all just kind of live here. Which is why it's often quipped that Portland is the place where hipsters go to retire."

Portland is building a reputation as an indie or DIY (do-it-yourself) city way beyond music. MovieMaker Magazine ranked Portland as America's ninth best city for independent filmmaking in 2007, its fourth year in the top 10 (down from No. 3 in 2006). And Portland has the second largest number of comic-book artists in the country, after New York, according to comicsreporter.com.

In the Place and Happiness Survey we found that the higher people rate the beauty of their community, the higher the level of community satisfaction. I don't have to tell you about the setting. Drive outside the urban growth boundary and there's farmland within 20 miles of downtown. Or head 70 miles west to the Pacific or 50 miles east to Mount

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Hood and the Columbia River Gorge. Portland itself is also a draw, with downtown's walkable blocks and old brick and cast-iron buildings, and distinctive close-in neighborhoods. This is a huge advantage for the Portland region, and the natural beauty is a major reason people move here.

But there is a larger context for the region's success. Greater Portland's economic future is tied to a mega-region of Cascadia, which stretches from Vancouver, B.C., in the north to Medford in the south. With a population of 8.9 million people and \$260 billion in economic activity, it is the 10th largest mega-region in North America and among the top 25 in the world. In fact, the world's top 40 mega-regions make up just 17 percent of global population but account for two-thirds of its economic activity and more than 90 percent of global innovation.

Far from being flat, the world is spiky. Talent, economic growth and innovation are becoming increasingly concentrated in a few dozen regions around the world. Portland is smack in the middle of one of the world's largest concentrations.

Being a spiky center brings costs as well as benefits. Until now, Portland has benefited from being a relatively affordable option in the Northwest and especially compared with the San Francisco Bay Area. The housing and real estate crisis provides some breathing room, but pressure on the region's urban housing prices will grow, and artists, musicians and other creative types who provide so much of urban Portland's energy may be priced out.

Growing economic inequality combined with mounting economic anxiety faced by blue-collar and service workers may fuel a backlash toward urban creatives, immigrants and gays, as is occurring in other parts of the country that have fallen victim to political polarization and culture war produced by this growing class divide. Population growth may come to undermine the quality of place that has fueled the region's economic development in the first place.

In positioning the region for the future, Portland's new mayor and City Council need to understand the increasing role of place and location in the spiky world. They need to realize that a prosperous region must not only create jobs, but it also must get the basics like public safety and education right. Long-run sustainable prosperity also turns

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on being an open, inclusive community that nurtures, invests in and truly values its quality of place.

Richard Florida is the author of five books, including "The Rise of the Creative Class" and "Who's Your City?" (published by Basic Books, whosyourcity.com), and director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. He will speak on June 4 in Portland at a summit presented by Greenlight Greater Portland, a consortium of the region's business leaders