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'The secret is out' and Forbes agrees: Boise is No. 1 Magazine rates city as top draw for talented workers

Boise continues to get rave reviews as one of the best spots in the nation to do business.

Forbes magazine's May 9 edition ranks the Boise metro area No. 1 on its annual Best Places for Business and Careers list, which rates 150 cities nationwide on their cost of doing business and ability to attract talented workers.

It's the second accolade for Boise in as many months. In April, the metro area finished second in Inc. magazine's annual list of "Best Cities to Do Business in America."

Experts said the Forbes ranking confirmed that the local economy continues to grow, attracting new businesses and residents to the Treasure Valley.

Some residents reacted enthusiastically to news of Boise's first-place finish on the Forbes list.

"Finally, the secret is out that Boise is so good," said Dr. Po Y. Huang, 35, chairman and medical director of the emergency department at St. Alphonsus Regional Medical Center. "I hope it won't become too popular."

Huang said he conducted his own extensive research into communities throughout the Intermountain West before settling on Boise five years ago.

"I was looking for outdoor activities and lifestyle as well as a great place to be a physician," said Huang, an avid mountain biker, kayaker and fly fisher.

He said he points out these advantages when recruiting medical staff for the hospital. "It's not hard to sell Boise," Huang said.

Eric E. Mott, 29, a long-time area resident, said he was thrilled with the recognition. "It is 99 percent positive for Boise and for Idaho," he said. "Boise has a lot to offer in business development, especially in tech."

The top rating will "make recruiting easier and bring more (job) candidates to our attention," according to Mott, operations director for Stellar Technologies in Boise, a private investment group.

Mott added that media attention highlighting Boise's quality of life was especially useful to business development and growth. "It's very beautiful, with a low crime rate, relatively low living costs and a wholesome and inviting family atmosphere," Mott said.

State officials said the valley's improving economy is reflected in Idaho tax collections in April that were 37.7 percent ahead of a year ago. That was more than double the previous one-year record of 18.8 percent set in 1996.

"We're accustomed to getting high marks for our economic performance, and the underlying economic conditions. But this reinforces that business is coming up roses in Idaho," said Idaho chief economist Mike Ferguson.

Shirl Boyce, vice president with the Boise Economic Development Council, noted that the Boise area has been in the Top 10 on Forbes' annual list each of the last five years.

"But it's important to note that you don't live and die on these kind of things," Boyce said. "A company isn't going to see this and decide to move here. But it will pique their interest enough to make them call us and see if we can fill their needs."

Moreover, he said, Economy .com, a Pennsylvania research outfit, ranked the Boise metro area 228 out of 358 communities in its Cost of Doing Business Index in March.

"And that's good," Boyce said. "If you're No. 1 on that list it means you have the highest costs of doing business."

Janell Hyer, labor economist with state's Department of Commerce and Labor, agreed with Forbes' assessment that the Treasure Valley is benefiting from a five-year population boom that has seen 39,000 new residents move into the metropolitan area.

She said the magazine's projection of 2.4 percent income growth is likely tied to almost 7,000 new jobs created in 2004, which include an estimated 1,100 high-tech jobs added by Micron to replace a comparable number of workers laid off in 2003.

"That's pretty good, considering what we've been through," Hyer said.

However, Forbes' assessment of a "steady decline" in the Boise area cost of living confused state economic experts. The March Wells Fargo Cost of Living Report showed consumer prices up 1.1 percent, or nearly double the national average.

"But regardless, whatever happens with inflation, it's still less expensive to live in Boise," said Don Holley, professor of economics at Boise State University.

Not everybody agrees that strong business growth is good for the Boise metro area.

Boise State University professor Todd Shallat said he worries about "unrestricted growth." Shallat, director of the university's Center for Idaho History and Politics, called Boise "a great place to move" and said he is hopeful that any growth will be intelligently controlled.

We "should welcome people" who come here for work, but zoning should be enforced to avoid leapfrog growth, he said. "What I worry about is people escaping their own suburban sprawl and creating more of it here," Shallat said.