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What thriving communities teach us

Knight Foundation research examines prosperous hometowns

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Long Beach, Calif., has the top three attributes of thriving communities: natural beauty, residents who are open to newcomers and abundant recreational activities. (Photo: David Liu, iStockphoto)

Paula Jameson may have been born in Englewood, Calif., but her heart belongs to **Long Beach**, a city of nearly half a million residents near Los Angeles. It has it all, she says. After 10 years, she's just as in love with Long Beach as when she and her husband bought their home in the Belmont Shores neighborhood in 1999.

"People were friendly there from the get-go," said Jameson, the director of a Long Beach-based senior housing non-profit. "We moved in and three neighbors brought cookies over. It was kind of ... Mayberry! We bought the house for-sale-by-owner. The people we bought from couldn't have been any better. We were sad in the end that they had to leave. To this day we send Christmas cards to each other. How many people do you know who do that?"

It turns out she isn't just a civic booster. According to a **recent survey** by **Gallup Consulting**, people who love their communities help them thrive in down economies. The survey of 26 municipalities chosen by the **Knight Foundation** to test methods for creating thriving communities found that Long Beach and five other cities elicited high community engagement scores — and that places with highly engaged residents also experienced strong economic growth. The other cities are San Jose, Calif.; State College, Penn.; Biloxi, Miss.; Myrtle Beach, S.C.; and Duluth, Minn.

Katherine Loflin, a Gallup consultant and an expert in community demography, thinks she knows why Long Beach and the others did so well. Gallup found in previous surveys that businesses that increase their employees'

engagement with the company also see improved financial performance. The survey found that correlation held true in communities. Another round of study will consider whether community engagement causes economic growth or the other way around.

“What we’re measuring here is loyalty and passion and how that relates to GDP growth,” she said. “The common thread we see in the data is that when people arrive in these towns, they are excited to be living there. They chose that place to live. They didn’t just throw a dart at the map and arrive there.”

There are some limitations, however: Bigger cities have a harder time maintaining their residents’ engagement than smaller cities — probably a function of the greater poverty in urban centers. Also, communities in which there has been an “economic exodus” — that is, people with the means to do so have moved away from failing economies — left residents that felt trapped and who were less engaged with the community.

The study’s top six performers, which range in size from 22,000 to 1.5 million residents, have managed to find a balance between growth and stability.

“You have to find ways to retain the things about your community that make it uniquely yours while also not saying no to all development,” Loflin said. “You have to be able to balance development, growth, innovation, retaining young people and knowing your town’s identity.”

Here’s how some of the top cities do it:

Myrtle Beach: Snowbirds rejoice 20 percent GDP increase 2000-2005

Researchers weren’t so sure **Myrtle Beach** would score very high: After all, if it’s the town you move to for retirement or where you own a second home, how connected could you feel?

Very, it turns out.

“This survey dispelled the myth that it’s where you’re born that you love the most,” Loflin said. “Myrtle Beach shows you can be a transplant and still fall in love with the community and make it your home.”

Long Beach: The community engagement hat trick 14.4 percent increase in GDP 2000-2005

With beaches, Southern California’s mild weather, friendly neighbors and lots of activities, **Long Beach** has the top three attributes of engaged and economically thriving communities, according to Knight’s survey: natural beauty, residents who are open to newcomers and abundant recreational activities.

State College: The kids are all right 13.16 percent GDP increase 2000-2005

It turns out the kids at Pennsylvania State University are the key to **State College**’s prosperity, according to the survey. Though many residents of college towns grumble about the effect of college students on everything from rental housing to traffic, the Knight Foundation found that attracting and keeping college students revitalizes both the intellectual energy of a town and the economic engine.

Biloxi: Character-building crises 0.67 increase in GDP 2000-2005

Biloxi may seem a strange city to spotlight for economic growth. After all, it’s still recovering from the devastation of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina. But that’s exactly why it’s on the list, said Loflin. While it has the lowest GDP increase of

any of the cities features, it makes up for it in community involvement, she said.

“This is a community where the residents — those who remain and who have returned — have dug in their heels,” she said. “They are determined to make that community a better place. They have the opportunity to remake their community, and to give the best each resident has to offer. The findings reflect that. The community loyalty and passion are extremely high.”

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