

Pittsburgh rated 'most livable' once again

After 22 years, back atop Places Rated Almanac

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Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette

The sun breaks through clouds over the Pittsburgh skyline at sunrise, revealing the fog-enshrouded three rivers. The West End Bridge is peeking through the fog in the foreground over the Ohio River.

By Dan Majors
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Mayor Luke Ravenstahl doesn't remember the last time Pittsburgh was rated No. 1 in the country by "Places Rated Almanac." That was in 1985, and he was only 5.

But he grew up in "America's Most Livable City," and last night said he was glad to hear that the latest edition of the almanac has again put Pittsburgh No. 1.

"That was always the tagline and I certainly agree," Mr. Ravenstahl said. "If you look at some of the cities ranked right behind us, certainly they have great reputations, and it's an honor to be the No. 1 city in America. I think it's great."

David Savageau, who has been compiling the "Places Rated Almanac" since 1981, said he was hoping that this year's edition would have a surprise No. 1 that might create the kind of buzz the 1985 rankings did.

"I was kind of shocked," Mr. Savageau said last night as he unveiled the new rankings. "I thought that Pittsburgh would always be up there, but I was looking for a newcomer. And it just didn't happen."

Top 10 cities

1. Pittsburgh
2. San Francisco
3. Seattle
4. Portland
5. Philadelphia
6. Rochester, N.Y.
7. Washington, D.C.
8. San Jose-Sunnyvale, Calif.
9. Boston
10. Madison, Wis.

■ **PG Poll: Is Pittsburgh the "most livable" city?**

Mr. Savageau is marketing this year's publication as the 25th anniversary edition. Over the years, there have been several publishers, including Rand-McNally in 1985, when Pittsburgh finished first.

"The country was aghast. Including some people in Pittsburgh," Mr. Savageau said. "Thank God we had Rand-McNally behind us or people wouldn't have taken it seriously. That story went on for years."

And while Rand-McNally has not been associated with the guide for some time, Mr. Savageau continues to use the same formula to rate the 379 metropolitan areas he surveys. There are nine categories: housing affordability (cost of living); transportation; jobs; education; climate; crime; health care; recreation; and ambience (museums, performing arts, restaurants and historical districts).

The seven-county area that makes up Pittsburgh failed to finish in the top 20 in any of the categories, ranging from a competitive 21st in recreation and 29th in education to a less-than-stellar 111th in housing and 135th in climate. But when the numbers are added up, the one that counts is the final total.

"To tell the truth," Mr. Savageau said, "I was rooting for New York. It's a city, like Pittsburgh, that has a lot of predispositions against it. But I found New Yorkers to be among the nicest people in the whole country, and there's such an incredible number of things to do there. But it has liabilities, such as the cost of living."

Mr. Savageau said the rankings favor large metropolitan areas with history. Thus, none of the top 10 cities in the rankings are in the Sun Belt. Five are in the Northeast, and four are on the West Coast. The 10th-ranked city, Madison Wis., is in the upper Midwest.

"I guess they are somewhat subjective," he said of the ratings. "In a sense that I try to imagine what people ought to be looking for. Low housing costs and lack of crime and more things to do. I think people would agree that these are good, valid ways of measuring metropolitan areas."

This is the seventh edition of the "Places Rated Almanac," and Pittsburgh hasn't always finished first, dropping as low as 14th in 1997 and 12th in 1999, the last year that the listings were done. But the city is the only one to finish in the top 20 every time.

"If you look at it statistically, not a lot has changed," Mr. Savageau said. "The differences between Nos. 1 and 14, when you're dealing with 379 places, are extremely small.

"And why wouldn't Pittsburgh be highly rated?" he asked. "It's one of the largest metropolitan areas in North America, so it ought to have a great assemblage of arts and culture. It ought to have education and health care.

"It's got a crummy climate, I know that. So do Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Buffalo. But I don't understand what is surprising about Pittsburgh doing as well as it does."

Some cities, he said, have found that they get just as much publicity out of being ranked last. So, this year, the folks in Goldsboro, N.C., should be pleased.

Mr. Savageau acknowledged he has a soft spot in his heart for Pittsburgh. None of the other cities to be ranked at the top ever embraced the title like Pittsburgh did.

"That was such a big deal," Mr. Savageau recalled. "Neither I nor Rand-McNally could believe the response. The fierce partisanship in Pittsburgh was amazing. And Mayor

[Richard] Caliguiri gave us the key to the city.

"When I visited in 1985, I was really taken with the place, as are most people who travel through the tunnel and see this wonderful vista. They change their minds about what they'd thought about the city."

"I'll have to get him a proclamation and a key to the city," Mr. Ravenstahl said.

The latest edition, self-published by Mr. Savageau, is available on-line at www.placesrated.com for \$24.99 plus \$5 priority shipping.

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