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Louisville lures expatriates back from N. Texas

07:26 PM CDT on Saturday, April 23, 2005

By ANGELA SHAH / The Dallas Morning News

PLANO – North Texas has long attracted new residents from locales across the country. Now at least one of those cities wants to lure some of them back.

Offering bigwigs and bourbon, the city of Louisville and its regional chamber of commerce are hosting a series of receptions around the country to encourage expatriates to consider returning to the Bluegrass State.

The Kentucky business and civic leaders came to an upscale Plano hotel last week. Previously, the group visited the San Francisco, Chicago and Atlanta areas.

The "Louisville Reunion" road show, aimed at stopping the city's brain drain in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, targets cities that are home to sizable numbers of former residents.

At the session Wednesday evening, about 100 former and potentially future Louisvillians listened to pitches in a part revival, part pep rally to showcase the renewed city.

Following a sing-along of "My Old Kentucky Home," Louisville officials spoke of a manufacturing city's makeover into a services and logistics hub.

"The old image is 'Strike City, U.S.A.,' blue collar," said Steve Higdon, president and chief executive of the chamber group, Greater Louisville Inc.

"Today, the new reality is Louisville is a very different place," he said with evangelistic fervor. "We're creating a buzz."

One by one, Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson and business leaders from Mercer Human Resources Consulting LLC and SHPS Inc. echoed that message, offering glowing testimonials on Louisville.

Executives at Louisville-based Yum Brands Inc., owner of Addison-based Pizza Hut, impressed the crowd with the announcement of 100 marketing and technology jobs for the taking.

Tracee Larson, a contractor for Texas Instruments Inc., was hooked.

A native of Portland, Ore., Ms. Larson first became interested in Louisville about 10 years ago when she met Mr. Abramson at a mayor's conference.

She signed up for the chamber's e-mail list to keep up with the city but didn't think she could find a good job there.

The presentations on Wednesday changed her mind. "Now, the tech, white-collar jobs have expanded to cities like Louisville," she said. "So I could have that as well as a high quality of living."

In fact, cost of living is roughly comparable, according to figures from ACCRA, a nonpartisan economic development group. Overall, Louisville is 2 percent more expensive than Dallas, figures show.

Workforce wanted

Top-quality workforces are key to a vibrant business climate. Yet obtaining one remains difficult for many Middle American cities seeking to rebuild their economies.

To reverse this, many cities have turned to aggressive recruiting campaigns, said Jeff Finkle, president and chief executive of the International Economic Development Council in Washington, D.C.

Michael Rosa, the Greater Dallas Chamber's vice president of economic development, says he's not surprised Louisville has set its sights on Dallas.

"It's certainly understandable another city or state would target D-FW just because of the critical mass and diversity of companies we have," he said.

In addition to wooing expatriates back, places like Louisville – or North Dakota or Ohio – also want to retain in-demand young people, who keep a community humming.

"They maybe haven't thought about how to make that connection back to Louisville, how much they would be appreciated," Mr. Finkle added.

Mr. Higdon himself left for college and lived in other places during his 20s. But he came back and wants others to know they can, too.

"It's maybe not a great place to raise hell, but it's a great place to raise a family," he says.

The chamber is tracking down expatriates through college and high school alumni groups. Its "Look at Louisville" electronic mailing list also helps compile information on those with connections to the city.

People can sign up via the Web or at an airport table during high-traffic times such as Kentucky Derby week or the holidays.

"It could be their moms signing them up," said Carmen Hickerson, a chamber spokeswoman.

Best known for college basketball and the Derby, Louisville, which recently adopted a county form of government, is home to about 750,000 people.

United Parcel Service Inc. is the city's largest employer, with a little more than 17,000 jobs. Other large companies include GE Consumer Products, Humana Inc. and Jewish Hospital Healthcare.

Mitzi Adwell, director of recruiting at Brown-Forman – which owns Jack Daniels, Finlandia Vodka and other beverage lines – finds North Texas an especially fertile environment for

poaching talented workers.

"They have the experience in consumer products" at companies in the Dallas area, she said. "They already know [Louisville]. Now they can find their dream job."

Dallas officials want to preserve and improve on North Texas' top-flight workforce. The vow to launch their own recruiting campaigns to bring in newcomers and bring back former residents.

"On the whole, it's hard to argue that D-FW has a broad set of employment opportunities and lifestyle opportunities," Mr. Rosa said. "If we had a beach and a mountain real close by, we'd probably have 25 million people living in the metroplex."

City's strengths

After an hour or two for the guests in Plano to mellow with hors d'oeuvres, cocktails and bourbon balls, the group was called into a ballroom.

The boosters hit all the quality-of-life highlights: housing, education and recreation.

In addition to its economic engine, the Louisville contingent boasted of its revitalized downtown, known as 4th Street Live, with an almost-open Muhammad Ali Center and opera, theater and ballet companies. The city is also constructing a "necklace" of park around itself.

Overall, the discussion had a positive tone. But the Louisville ambassadors couldn't resist taking a few shots at Dallas.

Boasting of his city's 15-minute average commute time, Mr. Higdon said, "The fact is, I can play two more rounds of golf each week than you do because I live in Louisville."

Then he hit a Dallas sore spot.

Referring to the University of Louisville's 11-1 college football record last season, he added: "We have the Cardinals, and you have the Cowboys."

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DALLAS OR LOUISVILLE: WHICH IS MORE EXPENSIVE?

Research shows the cost of living in the two cities is roughly comparable, with Louisville being slightly more expensive overall.

Location	Total*	Grocery	Housing	Utilities	Transportation	Health	Misc.	Rent**	Home price
Dallas	91.5	91.8	79.2	97.2	104.8	99.8	96.2	\$845	\$190,000
Louisville	93.3	96.4	80.9	97.9	111.4	87.2	97.7	\$722	\$206,000

*National average cost index is set at 100.

**Avg. rent: Two bedrooms, unfurnished, excluding utilities except water, 1 1/2 or 2 baths, 950 sq. ft.

***Avg. home price: 2,400 sq. ft. living area, new house, 8,000 sq. ft. lot, 4 bedrooms, 2.5 baths

SOURCE: ACCRA

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