

BusinessWeek says Johnson City one of best places in U.S. to raise kids

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Johnson City is one of the country's best places to raise kids — at least according to BusinessWeek magazine's fourth annual survey of such things.

In Tennessee, Clarksville topped the list, which the magazine based on affordability, job growth, safety and school test scores.

“That's what parents want,” the story's writer, Prashant Gopal, said in a video interview. “They want a place that's affordable and where their kids can get a great education.”

Hendersonville was the third Tennessee city to make the rankings, which considered cities with populations above 45,000. Many of the listed cities were within a close drive of major metropolitan areas (Nashville in both the other Tennessee cities' case), an advantage Johnson City lacked.

Local economic development professionals and chambers of commerce plan to leverage the ranking and attract new residents and new companies. Tom Ferguson, executive director of the Regional Alliance for Economic Development, said the “site selection” consultants who are helping companies establish or relocate pay close attention to the factors BusinessWeek studied.

“When they can see something like this that has been done by a credible publication like BusinessWeek it speaks highly about saying to a company they represent, ‘you might want to look at this community,’ ” Ferguson said. “We always talk about quality of life and this story kind of measures it for us.”

He added that the ranking should help the entire Tri-Cities metro area, which has a handful of smaller cities that didn't qualify for the rankings due to population.

“This speaks well of the region. There's probably not a hair's difference between education and those other quality of life factors in Johnson City and in Kingsport, Bristol or Greeneville.

“When it comes to recruiting and helping the region grow, whenever you can address the issue of kids or family, that is a real, real plus.”

At the very least, Ferguson said, the recognition should be a boost for the civic pride of current residents.

“It's good for local people, too, because it confirms some things that people probably feel about our region.”

Indeed, some of the developers' best testimonies can be found on the city's parks and

playgrounds.

Ben Martin wasn't surprised to learn about Johnson City's inclusion in the BusinessWeek rankings. Tossing a football Wednesday with his 9-year-old daughter Dora at South Side Elementary, where Dora is a third grader, Martin reflected on the quality of life differences between the Tri-Cities and the Dallas and Los Angeles metros where he grew up.

"You can come out here to these neighborhood schools, park 50 feet away and enjoy the facilities anytime," Martin said. "You don't have to worry about drug deals going down nearby or gunshots."

Martin will receive a master's degree in experimental psychology at East Tennessee State University next month, and is interested in pursuing his doctorate in ETSU's clinical psychology program. Even if he winds up in another Ph.D. program, he said it won't be too far from Johnson City and what he sees as its high quality of life.

"Where I was growing up, you really did have to choose what times of day to come to the park or go play at the school, and it's a big plus as a parent that you don't have to worry about that here."