

The search for signs of intelligent life in FORT WAYNE ; We went looking for smarts in the town Men's Health called the dumbest in the USA. They weren't hard to find.; [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Gerry Prokopowicz, who served as Lincoln Scholar for nine years at Fort Wayne's Lincoln Museum, says more needs to be done to get the city out of the dunce corner. "Some people in Fort Wayne are aware that the steady diminishment of its intellectual capital is directly connected to the town's stagnant economy and are trying to do something about it," says Prokopowicz, who teaches history at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C. "Unfortunately, they face a strong current of anti-intellectualism mixed with complacency and ignorance that characterizes much of the local business leadership."

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Full Text (1522 words)

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FORT WAYNE, Ind. Landing at Fort Wayne International Airport, you don't sense anything is amiss. In fact, it's all quite pleasant.

Grandmother-types hand out sugar cookies to arriving visitors. The Avis clerk is friendly and efficient. And driving into town, you pass golf courses and garden apartments, high schools and one of the locals' favorites, The Oyster Bar.

But once you arrive downtown, you start looking at the natives with a keener eye. Are they really as dumb as people say? Hard to tell, although the local hockey team is called the Komets. Yes, with a K.

This heartland city of 255,000 has been dubbed the dumbest town in all the land by Men's Health magazine. It came in dead last, losing out at the bottom of the heap to the likes of Laredo, Texas.

The survey is the talk of the town, or at least among those who read, and there appear to be thousands. More on them in a bit.

A front-page column in the Fort Wayne News-Sentinel last week came with the bold, all-caps headline: SO THEY SAY WE'RE NOT THE BRIGHTEST BULB IN THE BOX . . . WHAT DO THEY KNOW?

Columnist Kevin Leininger suggested it was basically "an evil Liberal Media Conspiracy." He pointed out that eight of the 10 smartest cities were in blue states, and eight of the dumbest were in red states. He says it's not a coincidence that "a certain amount of cultural elitism was at work here."

Though it would be understandable if Fort Wayne residents were seeing red these days, most are taking their newfound reputation for stupidity in stride.

"I always thought we were the fattest, not the dumbest," says Angela Jurczak, 26, a junior at IPFW (Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne).

The elementary education major says it's hard to believe her hometown came in dead last in the smarts department. "I would have guessed we're at least a C. Not an F. That's kind of sad."

Sad, yes, but many residents also say it's dead wrong and question how the magazine came up with its findings.

"In each case, we try to gather enough statistics from good sources to get what we think is an accurate snapshot," says Matt Marion, who oversees the monthly "MetroGrades" page for Men's Health. "We feel pretty confident."

Marion even offers a little advice. "If any of this resonates . . . look inward to see what you can do to make yourself better."

Dan O'Connell of the Fort Wayne/Allen County Convention and Visitors Bureau concedes that Fort Wayne is "sort of a vanilla city" but says he was "floored" by the study. He cites the museums and universities that call Fort Wayne home. "We're spending \$40-million- plus (\$64 million, actually) on a new library. That says something about our citizens. We're building a library, not a stadium."

Jeff Krull agrees. As head of the Allen County Public library since 1986, he is overseeing the expansion, which will house 2.6 million volumes, more than three times the national average for a city its size. Fort Wayne long has been known for its library system, including a genealogy section that rivals that of the Mormons in Salt Lake City.

"We're the largest public genealogical collection in the nation," says Krull, a Williams College grad. Last year, he adds, 2 million people used the library, borrowing 5 million books. And that was with two of the 13 branches closed.

Judy Zehner of Fort Wayne's Science Central, an impressive hands- on children's museum, wasn't as politic as Krull and asked questions left and right about the survey.

"I mean, how many cities do have one?" she asks, referring to the survey's Nobel Prize-winner criterion. "You're getting my dander up, I'll tell you that!"

Zehner acknowledged that the city is still recovering from the "manufacturing mentality." And, she adds, "our school system is hurting from budget crunches . . . but we have to move on from that."

Mayor Graham Richard is putting a good face on the survey, too, but he realizes the potential damage to the city's long-term reputation.

"It's unfortunate these things come out, and you try to find out how they did this," the Princeton grad says over tea in his ninth- floor offices overlooking the city.

The mayor talked of the city's blue-collar roots and the hard work of its citizens to build Fort Wayne into the second-largest city in the state, behind Indianapolis.

But the days when Fort Wayne manufactured the first washing machines, TV sets and refrigerators are long past.

Richard looks upon the study as a "rear-view mirror," saying he's more interested in the future and in getting the city's "best and brightest" to come back, a trend he sees slowly happening with the arrival of a few small high-tech companies. "We're in the transition period."

But Gerry Prokopowicz, who served as Lincoln Scholar for nine years at Fort Wayne's Lincoln Museum, says more needs to be done to get the city out of the dunce corner. "Some people in Fort Wayne are aware that the steady diminishment of its intellectual capital is directly connected to the town's stagnant economy and are trying to do something about it," says Prokopowicz, who teaches history at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C. "Unfortunately, they face a strong current of anti-intellectualism mixed with complacency and ignorance that characterizes much of the local business leadership."

Prokopowicz says what discouraged him most about the study was a quote he read from a Fort Wayne official who said he didn't pay much attention to these things.

"Maybe it's time to start paying attention to these quality-of- life issues," he says. "Maybe it's not always the messenger's fault."

John Commorato Jr. of Hyde Brothers Booksellers on Wells Street hasn't yet fled but, like Prokopowicz, he says he's tempted. He'd like to see the city be more welcoming to the arts underground, which, he says, is thriving despite little encouragement.

As for the intelligence of the residents, he has solid proof it exists: the used books that come and go from the cluttered store, which has volumes stacked from floor to ceiling. "Used-book stores are usually only as good as the people locally."

No one was reading at Cindy's Diner ("We serve the whole world, 15 at a time") one morning last week, but everyone at the counter had heard about the survey.

When John Scheele, the affable owner and short-order cook, announces a reporter is in their midst looking for intelligent life in Fort Wayne, Stephen Hinkle, president of the local Easter Seals organization, pipes up immediately. "That's an oxymoron!" (He then points out that "oxymoron" is a pretty big word for such a stupid city.)

"A lot of people here play dumb," says Darrell Jagers, president of the Salin Bank and Trust Company. "He's like the farmer who says he doesn't know anything when the city slicker shows up. It's a quiet kind of thing."

Gloria Diaz, a Fort Wayne native and columnist for the Fort Wayne Reader, the local arts and entertainment newspaper, says the city suffers as much from low self-esteem as low grades.

"I tend to agree with the study," says Diaz, arguing that the city has failed to emphasize such attractions as its inexpensive real estate, for example, as a lure for new blood and business. (The median price for an existing home in Fort Wayne is \$99,700, compared with \$188,500 nationwide, according to the National Association of Realtors.)

She also says residents are unwilling to spend on what's important, like education. "You have to spend money to make money."

Russ Choka, 81, owner of the Coney Island hot dog shop ("Our Buns are Steamed"), is more circumspect.

"What do you expect me to say?" he asks. "I've traveled all around the world, and nothing tops (Fort Wayne). They may be bigger but not better. Why do people always come back here to die if it's so bad, if we're so dumb?"

He pauses, then wonders: "I don't sound stupid, do I?"

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The grade curve

How do you determine the dumbest -- and smartest -- cities in the USA? Matt Marion of Men's Health says criteria include:

- * Bachelor's degrees per capita
- * Residents' SAT scores
- * State creativity scores (patents per capita, for instance) as assessed by Catalytix and the Richard Florida Creativity Group
- * Number of universities
- * Number of Nobel Prize winners for physics and medicine born within city limits

Note: Not all criteria are weighted equally

Intellectual index

Smartest and dumbest cities, according to Men's Health:

Smartest

1. Minneapolis
2. Boston
3. Denver
4. St. Paul
5. Seattle

Dumbest

1. Fort Wayne, Ind.

2. Corpus Christi, Texas

3. Laredo, Texas

4. Las Vegas

5. Newark

[Illustration]

GRAPHIC, B/W (MAP); PHOTO, Color, John Zich, USA TODAY ; PHOTO, B/ W, John Zich, USA TODAY; Caption: Smart shelves: John Commorato Jr. of Hyde Brothers Booksellers says the city's arts underground is thriving. Something for the next generation: Students visit Science Central, a power plant converted into a hands-on museum for children.

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