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Charlotte vs. Nashville? What to take away from the Queen City's margin in U.S. News rankings



The Nashville Tennessee Skyline at sunset Malcolm MacGregor



By Erik Spanberg – Managing Editor, Charlotte Business Journal - Jun 1, 2023

Jeff Hite stopped me short. This happened as I was winding my way toward asking about the 53-rung difference between Charlotte and Nashville in the latest Best Places to Live rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*. As in, No. 8 versus No. 61.

Hite, the chief economic development officer at the Nashville Area of Chamber Commerce, ferreted out my intentions faster than bachelorettes making a beeline for Broadway Street. Or country music fans racing to Ryman Auditorium.

“You’re not calling to poke me, are you?” Hite asked.

Well, yes, in fact, that was precisely the reason for the call.

Hite laughed and indulged a couple of light jabs before sharing some thoughts on the vigorous economic recruiting and retention battles playing out between a familiar handful of cities: Nashville, Austin, Denver, Charlotte, Atlanta, and Tampa.

Look, lists like this may not be gospel — Green Bay No. 1? Frozen tundra Green Bay? — but no need to skimp when superlatives are on offer. The annual rankings are weighted using various categories and federal statistics encompassing education, crime, economics, quality of life and so on.

Hite said Nashville's economic recruiting battles almost always include competition with Austin, closely followed by Denver and Charlotte.

Here, as you may have noticed, politicians, CEOs, and others involved in recruiting and related civic boosterism have come to put Nashville in the same rarefied air of sibling rivalry as Atlanta (ranked No. 64) and the Triangle (ranked No. 3).

In the spirit of good sportsmanship — OK, to keep him on the phone — I ask Hite whether such rankings are used with any regularity by people in his line of work. “We do when it pops up and helps us,” Hite said, noting the margins are narrow between the *U.S. News* rankings’ upper and lower reaches (true) while pointing out that Nashville consistently punches above its weight in measures such as jobs, GDP growth, and so on (also true).

He is generous enough not to ask whether I might be calling from Charlottesville or Charleston or some other Ch-place not named Charlotte, so, all is well. Nor did he mention AllianceBernstein.

Hite, referring to the usual suspects of economic development in the Southeast and Texas, told me they are mostly alike in tax burden, quality of life, business-friendliness and other fundamentals. “Yes, you need to be fun and cool and hip and affordable,” he added. “But the biggest thing is human capital. Can you make the talent pitch (to companies)?”

Dianne Jones, JLL’s Charlotte-based managing director of business and economic incentives, works with brokers in the Carolinas and across the Southeast.

As I offered the newly minted mantra of “We’re No. 8!” she hinted that now might not be the time to declare a dynasty. Do people in her line of work pay heed to such rankings? “Transparently, no,” Jones answered. “It’s about drilling down on the industry sector and how a community can support specific industries and what companies need individually to be a good fit.”

Direct flights to key business centers, access to mass transit, labor skills and availability, all these are prominent on corporate wish lists.

John Boyd, principal at Boca Raton, Florida-based site selection firm The Boyd Company, cautioned against dismissing best places and other rankings too quickly.

While Boyd did not say these are dominant factors in decision-making, he said they do make an impression. Boyd said that impression speaks to how much the site-selection industry has changed. In many cases, site searches start internally, with company executives turning to Google for some surface details before digging deeper and, eventually, calling in the experts. Smaller companies might handle everything in-house.

Something that lives online for a long time, like popular rankings and surveys, can pop into the prefrontal cortex and stick around, you might say.

With all this in mind, how best to settle Nashville-vs.-Charlotte, other than where we began (No. 8 and No. 61)?

On the field, of course. These are cities that are relative newbies in big league sports but still culpable for plenty of heartbreak.

Perhaps we can tidy this up with a comparison of Super Bowl losses. (Now is not a good time to bring up Major League Soccer after a recent visit by Nashville SC.)

Tennessee's Titans, in their lone appearance, following the Y2K season, lost their Super Bowl on the very last play of regulation, one yard shy of tying the score. And the Carolina Panthers, you may remember, never had a chance in Super Bowl 50 and, 12 years earlier, nearly matched the Titans' level of we-were-this-close torture by bowing out with all of 14 seconds to go.

Where were we? Ah, yes, rankings. Best places to live (and occasionally die in the Super Bowl).

Ned Curran, a real estate executive who helped build Ballantyne into a corporate hub in the 1990s and early 2000s, continues to keep a close eye on such matters through his boutique consultancy, Stone Cottage Advisors.

So, does Curran think Charlotte has scored a decisive advantage over Nashville? "I think we should enjoy our superior ranking for as long as it lasts," he said. "Until the next ranking, where we may not get the same outcome."