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Wilmore: 'Most affordable suburb'

BusinessWeek praises Jessamine County town

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WILMORE — Leonard Fitch, whose family has operated the IGA grocery in this Jessamine County town for 52 years, said residents "want the best of life without spending a lot of money."

They live in the right place, according to BusinessWeek magazine, which recently named Wilmore as "most affordable suburb" in Kentucky.

One could question the magazine's methodology (more on that later) or the term "suburb" (more on that later, too). But folks who live in and around Wilmore generally take BusinessWeek's assessment as a compliment.



Brian Lamb and friends ate Friday lunch at Tastebuds, the eatery inside the Main Street pharmacy. Lamb lives in Keene but was raised in Wilmore.

"When you come back, it always seems like home," Lamb said. "It was a great place to grow up. It's changed a little bit, but for the most part it has stayed the same."

As Beth Hoenicke slathered tomato sauce on dough for a Tastebuds calzone, Elton John sang *Country Comfort* on the radio: "And it's good old country comfort in my bones/Just the

BusinessWeek magazine overlooked a lot of its own criteria in choosing Wilmore as the "most affordable suburb" in Kentucky. But the Jessamine County town that's off the beaten path still looks pretty good to its residents.

sweetest sound my ears have ever known ... "

Hoenicke said Wilmore is "pretty affordable" compared with Michigan, where she and her husband, Gary, moved from.

BusinessWeek says it selected "one affordable suburb near the biggest city in each state where residents can find the best quality of life for their money in 2009."

Here's where the magazine's reasoning is shaky.

The magazine said the selected suburbs "were limited to towns within 25 miles of the most populated city." BusinessWeek apparently thinks Kentucky's "most populated city" is Lexington.

But Kentucky's largest city is actually Louisville.

"The only thing I can figure out is they went back and looked at 2000 census numbers," said Ron Crouch, director of the Kentucky State Data Center.

That census was taken before Louisville merged with Jefferson County, so its official 2000 population was 256,231, while Lexington's was 260,512.



But Louisville and Jefferson County merged in 2003. So the 2007 estimated population of Louisville was 557,789 while Lexington's was 279,044.

The magazine selected towns with populations of 5,000 to 60,000 people, median family incomes of \$51,000 to \$120,000, and lower-than-average crime rates.

Wilmore's population is not quite 6,000, and BusinessWeek lists Wilmore's median income as \$41,512. That was the lowest among the 50 states reported by the magazine. The next-lowest was \$44,506 in St. Albans, Vt. The 2000 census lists the median value of owner-occupied houses in Wilmore as \$104,000.

Wilmore has no violent crime to speak of, although it did have a bank robbery just before Christmas, Police Chief Steve Boven said. "We even had a stolen car here a while back," he said.

Crime is low because Wilmore is off the beaten path of U.S. 68. But Boven also credits the Christian influence of Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary, the two institutions of higher learning that

largely contribute to Wilmore's identity.

"You have a great number of people that work and teach at each of those facilities that live here in town," said Boven, who is also a graduate of the seminary. "The people who come here, they're aspiring to graduate from a Christian college and go out into different fields and minister."

But Fitch hopes that after students go out into the world to become ministers and missionaries, they someday return to Wilmore to retire.

"If you go in the Methodist church, they have a window that says 'Come, tarry and go.' And I always say 'Come back to Wilmore and enjoy your twilight days,'" Fitch said. "A lot of people are doing that."

The magazine also said it weighted "a variety of factors including livability (short commutes, low pollution, greenspace), education (well-educated residents, high test scores) ... and affordability (median household income, cost of expenditures)."

Overall, Wilmore came out looking pretty good. And that gives Wilmore something to crow about to Nicholasville, the Jessamine County seat, which last year Money magazine ranked as the No. 1 small city in the country for affordable homes.

Still, some people don't cotton to the idea of calling Wilmore "a suburb," said Margaret Morgan, the city's community development director.

"Of course, nobody wants to be known as a bedroom community," Morgan said. "We want to be a stand-alone town and just enjoy our close proximity to a major shopping area in Lexington. It's the best of both worlds, I think."

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