



'Embrace your Lexington-ness,' Boise visitors are told

By: Sharon Fisher | May 16, 2018



Lexington visitors were particularly impressed with the 20 minutes of free parking available to Boise visitors. File photo.

While Boise development projects such as the Grove Plaza came in for praise from a recent group of more than 180 visitors led by the Lexington Chamber of Commerce, some of the things that impressed them the most were little ones.

Like Boise's free 20-minute parking downtown.

Linking it to "Boise nice," or the city's reputation for courtesy, Karen Hill, chairman of Commerce Lexington and chief operating officer at Baptist Health Lexington, suggested a similar program in Lexington connected to that city's reputation for hospitality, looking at it as a branding opportunity.

The Lexington contingent traveled to Boise for two principal reasons: to learn about Boise and maybe find a Boise achievement to replicate at home, and to network among each other. "In three days, you can make relationships that would take you 20 years to build at home," said Cassie Mitchell, vice president of marketing and business development at Blue Grass Care Navigator. Along with dozens of other attendees, she was making her first leadership trip with Commerce

Lexington.

Greg Mullin, a partner at Blue & Co., a Lexington CPA, was on his 10th such trip. "One thing that attracted me is you have a lot going on downtown," he said. Others were impressed by the abundance of restaurants and local retail in downtown, noting that many cities have restaurant rows but not necessarily much downtown retail.

"Something you are doing well is you have a designated person [at city hall] coordinating neighborhood associations," Hill said. "I think I'll mention that back in Lexington." The city's merged arts and history department and public art also came in for praise. Other Boise features that Lexington attendees noted included downtown grocery stores, bicycle trails, and the Greenbelt, as well as partnerships between economic development organizations and Boise State University.



Clark Krause

One advantage Boise has over Lexington, which is about 80 miles each from Louisville and Cincinnati, is that it is more isolated, said Clark Krause, executive director at Boise Valley Economic Partnership. When companies visit Boise, he doesn't have to worry about them going to the Idaho equivalent of Louisville the next night, he said. He encouraged Lexington attendees to look for similar differentiating factors and to embrace their "Lexington-

ness."

"Boise has turned their challenges into opportunities, and we could do the same thing," Hill said.

Lexington chose to visit Boise because the cities are similarly sized. Both are considered to be "second-tier cities," that tend to be less expensive and closer to the outdoors than larger cities with more amenities, Krause said. For that reason, some attendees said the Boise trip was more relevant than others to larger cities.

That said, both cities have some problems that so far they have found intractable, such as affordable housing and transportation, and being a politically "blue" island in a largely "red" state. "Our whole legislative scheme for cities is to pretty much keep us from doing anything," Boise Mayor Dave Bieter told the group. Like Idaho cities, Kentucky cities don't have local option taxing authority, so city residents haven't been able to vote to raise money for a public transit system, attendees said. And as in Boise, land has become so expensive in Lexington that it's difficult for



Karen Hill.
Photo by Sharon Fisher.

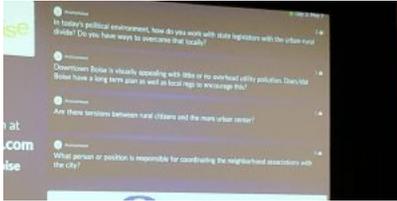
developers to build affordable housing. This leads to concerns that the cities will have trouble retaining their young people, though Krause cited studies saying Boise ranked seventh in the country for retaining its college graduates.

Boise hosted a similar group last fall from Springfield, Missouri, and is slated to receive four other groups this year: Waco, Texas; Wichita, Kansas; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Folsom, California, said Ray Stark, senior vice president of the Boise Metro Chamber.



Boise Mayor
David H. Bieter

Boise's lack of diversity a problem, attendees say



The Slido app let participants ask questions anonymously. Photo by Sharon Fisher.

It wasn't all sweetness and light during the Lexington, Kentucky visit. Boise and Idaho came in for some pointed questions, perhaps aided by Slido, an application that let attendees ask questions anonymously that then appeared on screens in full view of the group. One issue that cropped up repeatedly was the lack of racial diversity in Boise, as well as Idaho's white supremacist history and the current Redoubt movement.

The running joke was that the Lexington delegation, which included six African-American women as well as a similar number of African-American men, doubled the minority population in Boise.

"Diversity makes our community richer because we have to learn from each other," said Karen Hill, chairman of Commerce Lexington and chief operating officer at Baptist Health Lexington.

Boise hosts admitted the city and state need to do better, because, among other reasons, the low existing minority population was making it more difficult for companies to recruit minorities. Some potential Idaho employees have expressed concern about the lack of a dating pool, as well as the lack in general of "people who look like me," a phrase also heard more than once. With Idaho's unemployment rate and college graduation rate so low, and with the state dependent on migration to fill jobs, anything that discourages potential new residents is a problem.

Angela Evans, a Lexington city council member, said minority applicants need to be recruited.

"You can't just say, 'Nobody responded,'" said Evans.

Outgoing Boise State University president Bob Kustra – who once served as president of Eastern Kentucky University — agreed.



Angela Evans

"You have to make people feel wanted," she said, suggesting that businesses should be recruiting minority employees the same way that minority athletes are recruited. And companies can't just try to recruit minorities to increase their diversity to help them get contracts, she warned. "It has to be genuine. People can see right through it."



Danny Murphy.
Photo by Sharon Fisher.

Racial diversity in Boise is likely to increase in the next few years due to the number of refugees and other immigrants moving to Boise, said Kustra, adding that Boise is one of the largest refugee cities in the U.S. There are now 148 languages spoken in the Boise School District. Danny Murphy, assistant dean of community engagement & diversity for the University of Kentucky College of Law, also said he was inspired by the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial and how it covered diversity in all its aspects rather than being limited to Judaism.

The visiting delegation said the Lexington business community could do a better job with diversity itself. One internship program had only three African-American participants until C.B. Akins, a pastor with First Baptist Bracktown, said he called it to organizers' attention and suggested they make diversity a priority. After they did that, the number of African-American participants went up to 300. "We all know that diversity is good for business, but in some cases it can be difficult to see," he said.

Commerce Lexington is also working to make its own delegations more diverse. African-American Lexington businesswomen took it upon themselves to increase the number of attendees in their demographic, because African-Americans who had attended the event in the past were primarily male, Evans said.

Commerce Lexington President and CEO Bob Quick said the Boise trip had the most diverse participant pool and the most young entrepreneurs. The trips are typically composed primarily of "bankers and lawyers," rather than small business owners, because they are the only ones who could afford both the trip itself and the time away from their work, said Shirie Hawkins, assistant vice president of commercial lending for Community Trust Bank. The trip cost from \$1,800 to \$2,500 depending on accommodations and travel, said Mark Turner, Commerce Lexington director of communications, adding that the organization offered several scholarships to increase the number of millennials attending. The group also held a lunch between visiting millennials and millennials from Boise, and the Boise Metro Chamber's Boise Young Professionals came in for praise.

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