

Finding out when a city is not a city

'Welcome to America's most livable city' was the slogan in gold letters on a blue banner that hung from the rafters. This was the greeting that a passenger received on arrival a few years ago at the Greater Pittsburgh International Airport. The banner no longer hangs there.

Today, best city honors belong to Seattle. As reported by the Associated Press, "the Places Rated Almanac picked Seattle tops among 333 cities in terms of climate, crime, education, health care, environment, jobs, art and recreation." Good for Seattle, the only problem is that its best city designation is inaccurate.

Richard Boyer and David Savageau discovered a gold mine in 1981 when they published their first edition of Places Rated Almanac. Working with a computer and using a mass of data, primarily from the US Census, they came out with a much quoted but also criticized ranking of 277 metropolitan areas in the country. At that time the Atlanta Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (that's the official name) was ranked as number one in the nation.

Somewhat cumbersome to use, the title of Atlanta SMSA was simply listed as Atlanta. Boyer and Savageau explained the term *metropolitan area* and how it differs from *city* in their best selling first edition, but in the public's mind it was still easier to comprehend "city of Atlanta" rather than "metropolitan Atlanta". And the news media, always pressed for space and time, used this simple designation of Atlanta, and so the best *metropolitan area* was called the best *city*, and that was Atlanta in 1981.

Is there a major difference between a metropolitan area and a city, or is this just splitting hairs? Well, consider this: metropolitan areas are counties, while cities are areas within counties. Further, the population of a city such as Seattle is just over 500,000, while its metro area population exceeds 2.5 million.

In its simplest form, a metropolitan area is defined as a county with a city or urban core of 50,000 or more people. The metro area takes the name of the city, and the communities surrounding the city and within the county are called suburbs, which are socially, economically and culturally linked to the central city.

The Census Bureau is not entirely happy with this definition of suburbs, but this is the term they use for the rest of the metropolitan population outside the city, but still within the county.

Another complication arises from the divisions of metro areas, now designated simply as *Metropolitan Statistical Areas* since 1983. In attempting to better define large populations over extensive areas, newly designated Primary MSAs are combined to form newly designated *Consolidated MSAs*.

It's quite a mouthful, but locally we are labeled as the Providence Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area, and when combined with the Pawtucket-Woonsocket-Attleboro PMSA and the Fall River PMSA, we are the Providence Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area.

The Census Bureau recognizes the fact that cities and towns are more important than counties in New England; thus, metro areas are defined by cities and towns here. This is true only for this part of the country.

These new definitions of metropolitan areas were considered by Boyer and Savageau when they wrote their second edition of the Places Rated Almanac in 1985. Of the 329 metro areas ranked, Pittsburgh was at the top, Providence ranked 26, Pawtucket-Woonsocket-Attleboro was 125 and Fall River ranked 191.

The increasing popularity of the almanac convinced Boyer and Savageau to publish their third edition in 1989, which ranked Seattle number one.

Apparently the authors did not read the February 1989 issue of Newsweek that ranked Providence one of the ten "hottest cities" in America. Providence's ranking dropped considerably from the previous almanac, as did the other two local metro areas: Providence ranked 68, Pawtucket-

Woonsocket-Attleboro was 202 and Fall River came in at 216 in the latest ranking.

The extraordinarily high house prices of the Providence Consolidated MSA help to explain the lowered ranking of these three metro areas.

But even more important than a ranking of metro areas is their significance in the nation. Nowhere is this better revealed than in the recently released figures from the 1990 census.

There are now 284 MSAs in the nation, and they house 77.5 percent of the 249.6 million Americans counted in 1990. Further, the 39 that have a population of more than 1 million, and this includes the Providence Consolidated MSA, now contain more than 50.2 percent of the country's population, up from 45.9 percent in 1980.

But perhaps the most significant point revealed is that metropolitan areas grew by 11.6 percent over the past decade compared to a 3.9 percent growth of non-metropolitan areas. This is in sharp contrast to the decade of the 1970s when non-metropolitan areas grew by 15.1 percent, compared to only 10.1 percent for metropolitan areas.

These 1990 numbers mean the movement of

Americans to rural areas and small towns indicated in the 1980 counts has been reversed, and metro areas with their central cities and nearby expanding emerging cities are the areas of growth. These numbers also substantiate the newly formed spread-city that is coming to characterize the American urban tapestry.

In the words of a spokesman from the Population Reference Bureau: "Instead of a single city sitting like a hub with spokes going out in all directions to people who are dependent on it, you're seeing a lot of satellite cities."

When the 1989 edition of Places Rated Almanac ranked the Providence PMSA number 68 of 333 in the nation, it did not say that the city of Providence had this ranking. What it did say was that Providence and its 14 surrounding suburbs, including Barrington, South Kingstown and East Greenwich, among others, were the metropolitan area ranked. But the media said it was Providence. And that is when a city is not a city—when it is considered a metro area.

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