

U.S.

Denver's Appeal to Millennials? Jobs, Mountains and, Yes, Weed

By JOHN HANC JULY 20, 2016

DENVER — On Pecos Street in the Lower Highlands section, known as LoHi, Avanti Food & Beverage has transformed an old 11,000-square-foot factory and auto repair shop into a sort of food court for the Uber generation.

Seated cafeteria-style in the main dining area one recent night, a young crowd, many in hoodies and yoga pants, were sampling dishes from seven local start-up restaurants. Udon noodles, tortas (Mexican sandwiches) and Venezuelan-style flatbreads were among the choices offered by entrepreneurial restaurateurs, most of them food-truck vendors hoping to make the leap to brick and mortar.

Nothing cost more than \$15.

“It’s good, solid cuisine at affordable prices,” said Avanti’s co-owner, Patrick O’Neill. “That goes a long way with millennials.”

The youthful party continues on many nights around the renovated Union Station in the trendy Lower Downtown district, known locally as LoDo, and along Larimer Street in River North, or RiNo. It was unclear on a recent evening whether there were more bars than signs supporting Bernie Sanders, but both were plentiful. Scruffy Murphy’s Irish Pub, Los Chingones’ rooftop bar and the Wynkoop Brewing

Company (one of 65 microbreweries here, according to the Colorado Brewers Guild) were all doing a brisk business.

As for the Vermont senator, so popular with millennials, he was depicted on a two-story painted wall mural — like something you'd see in Los Angeles or Belfast celebrating heroes — with a fist raised and the slogan “Rise Together!”

This is also an apt slogan for this city, which has risen from economic stagnation and urban irrelevance to become a millennial magnet.

According to a Brookings Institution analysis of population movement from 2009-14, the city had a net annual migration gain of 12,682 people ages 25 to 34, the highest of any metropolitan area in the United States. That means an average of 12,682 more millennials per year moved here than left, for each of the five years measured.

Similarly, an analysis of census data by Zillow, the real estate website, found that 18- to 34-year-olds accounted for 35 percent of the city's population growth from 2010 to 2014, up from 26 percent in the first 10 years of the century.

While definitions of a millennial vary (a widely used one is someone born from 1981 to 1997), it's clear that many of this generation are attracted to this city. One obvious reason is the economy: the city's is healthy — and hiring. Development Research Partners, a local research firm, found that of the 1.6 million jobs in metropolitan Denver, about 33.2 percent were held by 19- to 34-year-olds.

The city scores highly in qualitative surveys as well. U.S. News and World Report's 2016 Best Places to Live study ranked the city No. 1. Its proximity to outdoor recreation, a progressive mind-set and its walkability were all cited as factors.

Those were some of the attractions for Adam Frank, 35, a Brooklyn native and lawyer who moved here in 2011.

“Best decision I ever made,” Mr. Frank said. “It has a lot of old homes with character and doesn't look like a prefab community.”

He also cited the brewpubs and restaurants, as well as access to skiing and hiking, which he loves and could do only rarely while living in New York.

Mr. Frank and his wife, Kathleen, a California native, met here and live in the Baker section in an 1886 two-story, mansard-style house. A partner in a civil rights law firm, he said he appreciated the entrepreneurism here that helped give him and his law partner the impetus to put up their shingle in 2015.

“It is definitely a friendly place for people looking to start a business or throw new ideas out there,” he said.

One new idea, of course, was Colorado's legalization of marijuana sales in 2014.

How much impact does that have on the city's coolness factor among millennials? “Some have speculated that it helped put Denver on the map,” said Carrie Makarewicz, an assistant professor in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver. “It got national news coverage and made people think of Denver as this more progressive place.”

But other, more significant developments have also made the city attractive to a young generation. “Denver was in a major recession in the '80s,” said Professor Makarewicz, an urban planner. “The main industry was gas and oil, so when the energy sector bombed, the business community and government got together and decided they needed to diversify and make some major investments.”

Among the changes over the next two decades were a growth boundary to limit urban sprawl, better air-quality controls, a new airport and a downtown baseball stadium (Coors Field, where the Colorado Rockies play).

The efforts of local preservationists kept many historic buildings from destruction, while new zoning laws changed neighborhoods to accommodate mixed-use buildings and what urban planners call a form-based code. That means, Professor Makarewicz said, that “buildings are approved more by how they look than what's in them.”

One result was the distinctive neighborhoods that are part of the city's appeal to young people. They were made accessible by new mass transit lines after voters

approved, in 2004, a sales tax increase to fund the so-called FasTracks program. Its latest addition is a 22.8-mile light-rail train from Denver International Airport to Union Station that opened with much fanfare in April. (Yet another new line, this one connecting the northern suburb of Westminster with Denver, is scheduled to open on July 25.)

Matt Prosser, a vice president of Economic and Planning Systems, a California-based consulting firm, said the transit system was a “central component” in the area’s ability to draw millennials.

“It makes living here a lot easier for younger folks,” he said. “You don’t necessarily have to own a car.”

Gov. John Hickenlooper, a former mayor of this city, is often cited as an important political force in the city’s evolution. “People are flocking here,” he said in an email, citing the U.S. News ranking and a study showing that 16 percent of the population were young adults. “We have worked hard to ensure that Denver creates the things that millennials are looking for.”

As mayor, Mr. Hickenlooper led the effort behind the FasTracks referendum. He is also a founder and former owner of the Wynkoop Brewing Company.

Underlying it all — the beer, the trains, the mountains and, yes, the legal weed — is a sense of identity for this city that millennials find appealing.

Mr. Prosser’s firm, Economic and Planning Systems, is working with the city on the latest version of its 30-year comprehensive plan, Blueprint Denver.

“As we started talking about what made Denver successful over the last 10 years, particularly with millennials, one theme kept coming up: the openness,” Mr. Prosser said. “It’s a community that you can move into and feel like you’re accepted and find your way.”

For young people, that is a powerful reason to live here and to stay, despite rising housing costs that raise questions about how long the millennial boom can continue and recent reports suggesting that the legalization of marijuana may have added to the homeless population.

Still, the allure of the city remains powerful.

“There’s definitely a culture of, ‘Hey, that’s cool, let’s support each other,’ whether it’s in business, or the arts or in politics,” said Mr. Frank, the transplanted New Yorker. Notwithstanding what he says is a lack of good pizza — the city’s one detriment, in his view — he is firm on his views of his adopted, youthful city.

“We’re never leaving,” he said.

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