

Is Blacksburg doomed to become a trendy place to live?

"Oh, we got trouble. Right here in River City! With a capital 'P'..."

And it stands for — publicity.

Blacksburg is hot. One of America's 10 "Dream Towns," according to Outside magazine. It's now mentioned in the same breath as Santa Fe, N. M., and Santa Barbara, Calif. — the sort of trendy places where shops sell gourmet doggy biscuits and designer clothes.

If we don't watch out, some movie star or semicelebrity will discover Blacksburg and move in. People magazine will do a photo shoot with Brush Mountain in the background and it will be all over.

Blacksburg will be an "in" place to live. Modest Cape Cods

will sell for numbers that look like Mexico's debt. More chain restaurants and hotels will sprawl along the highways.

And Blacksburg, that quirky little college town so many of us love, will become Velveeta, USA.

Last week's article in Outside magazine didn't tell folks who live in Blacksburg anything they didn't already know.

People like Ed Kopakowski moved their families here from the Big City and refuse to leave even if it means turning down a good job.

"It offers a real balance and mix of urban and rural that makes this a special place to live. It gives you the best of both worlds but also eliminates the negatives in those particular worlds," said Kopakowski.

The town has good schools, a safe environment for children, outdoor recreation within minutes, rather than hours, of home. It's also diverse. "We like the fact that that our kids are going to school with black kids and blue kids and purple kids and yellow kids and green kids," said Kopakowski. "They have friends who

look and speak differently than they do."

Pat Bixler who heads a high-tech company in Virginia Tech's Corporate Research Center has found it easier in the past few years to coax Tech alumni and other professionals to abandon the bright lights of Atlanta, Raleigh and Southern California for Blacksburg's mix of rural tranquility and entrepreneurial energy.

"I tell these recruits it's safe to come back in every sense of the word. The community is safe. In professional terms, you aren't in the boondocks — you'll have 1,700 other high-tech professional colleagues," said Bixler.

Now, a steady chorus of national publicity for the town and the New River as well as new tenants in the town's industrial park and the Corporate Research Center are drawing more people. This growth is a gauge of a healthy local economy generating good-paying jobs.

Given a choice between a dying town or a growing one, most of us would choose to wrestle with the challenges of growth.

And there are challenges: The average house price in Blacksburg this year is \$191,840 — up 40 percent in just five years. Home buyers are snapping up new \$300,000 and \$450,000 houses before they are even under roof.

The best defense against overwhelming growth may be the town's drawbacks — limited job opportunities for middle- and upper-level executives and geographic remoteness. Executives like Kopakowski, whose jobs require travel, face either a long drive or an expensive, often inconvenient, flight out of the Roanoke Regional Airport.

We have to hope that these factors will restrain growth to where local governments can manage development without sacrificing the area's identity or bankrupting its budgets for new schools and roads.

If we can just fly under the celebrity radar, build a firewall against the spread of movie stars from Charlottesville, perhaps we can have a few more years to savor Blacksburg's quiet pleasures.

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