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The Star-Ledger

How green is my city? Elizabeth gets national notice

Popular Science cites recycling, access to mass transit, clean nonprofits

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BY JONATHAN CASIANO
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Elizabeth is named one of America's 50 Greenest Cities in the new issue of Popular Science magazine, which recognized the city for its recycling program, access to mass transit and partnerships with environmentally focused nonprofits.

Historically known more for its heavy industry than its environmental conscience, Elizabeth was the only New Jersey city to make the magazine's first green list. The city was ranked No. 45, between Fremont, Calif., and Livonia, Mich. Portland, Ore., was ranked No. 1, followed by San Francisco, Boston, Oakland and Eugene, Ore.

In compiling the list, Popular Science evaluated more than 200 American cities with populations over 100,000, drawing raw information from the U.S. Census and the National Geographic Society's Green Guide, said deputy editor Jacob Ward.

The cities were ultimately ranked according to four categories: electricity, transportation, green living and recycling. Specifically, the magazine looked for cities with renewable energy sources, a high percentage of people using public transportation, buildings certified by the U.S. Green Building Council and a comprehensive recycling program.

Elizabeth scored high in green space, green design, recycling and water quality, said Ward. He said the magazine was especially impressed with the city's partnership with the non-profit Groundwork Elizabeth to plant trees and build a 2.25-mile bike trail along the Elizabeth River.

"The ranking is intended to inspire other cities to follow in the footsteps of the top 50 on our list, and projects like those are the kind we'd love to see any mid-size city undertake," Ward said.

Jonathan Phillips, executive director of Groundwork Elizabeth, said the ranking underscores a growing environmental consciousness in the city.

"Whenever I speak to anybody here they all know about the environment. They know about climate change, they're aware of the limited open space we have here and they're really cognizant of things like recycling, open space and being able to walk in a park or plant a tree," Phillips said.

In addition to the partnership with Groundwork Elizabeth, Mayor Chris Bollwage pointed out the recent opening of a biodiesel production plant in the city's port section and the efforts of another environmentally-focused nonprofit, Future City, Inc., to draw attention to the city's waterways and wetlands.

"In collaboration with dedicated environmental organizations, the city has incorporated numerous green programs and projects that are improving our environment and the quality of life for generations to come," Bollwage said in a statement.

While some cities on the list, like Berkeley, Calif., are widely known for their "green" character, others, like Elizabeth or Laredo, Texas, were less predictable. But Ward said the magazine wanted to highlight cities

making green strides, not just pretty places.

"Often the boldest moves are made by the grittiest places, and we wanted to applaud the moves they were making before the effects were even apparent," said Ward. "It's when a city is at its grittiest that it's most important to encourage forward-minded thinking."

Future City CEO Michelle Doran McBean said that despite Elizabeth's industrial reputation, the city is home to a valuable eco-system and people who care deeply about preserving it.

"There's a very dynamic eco-system here between the Elizabeth River, Arthur Kill watershed, an estuary that is part of New York Harbor and parks that are maintained and constantly being improved," McBean said. "There's an emerging civic engagement and multiple sectors that are complimenting and enhancing each other to support and sustain our environment."

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