

NEWS

This Delaware city is on the list of 25 'cities on the rise' in Southern Living magazine



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What's one of "The South's Best Cities on the Rise"? Dover, Delaware, according to Southern Living.

In the magazine's April issue, Dover made the final spot on the list of 25 cities "with flourishing downtowns and burgeoning food scenes." These "up-and-coming areas have become hot destinations."

What's No.1? Wilmington — but it's Wilmington, North Carolina.

Here's the section in the magazine about Dover:

"Delaware's capital has evolved quite a bit since its early days as the appointed site of Kent County's courthouse. Still home to the state's supreme court and other government agencies, the city may be embarking on its biggest season of change to date. In 2023, the Downtown Dover Partnership presented the Capital City 2030 plan that will add a proposed multimodal transportation hub, around 100,000 square feet of commercial development, 20 acres of green space, 1,000 residential units, and a half-mile river walk to be built over the next decade."

More about redevelopment plans: \$25 million 'jumpstart' to downtown Dover revitalization for apartments, shops, parking

"Cities were picked by Southern Living's editors, who compiled a roster based on research, reporting and personal experiences," said Lisa Cericola, the magazine's deputy editor.

Then readers selected their top picks in the magazine's annual "South's Best" awards survey, which had more than 20,000 respondents.

Diane Laird, executive director of the Downtown Dover Partnership, said it's "heartening" to see that the plan to transform the core of the city is being noticed outside Delaware.

Because of the magazine article, "future residents, workers and small business owners from other parts of the Southern region may be on the lookout for a forward-moving town in which to relocate," Laird said.

The projects mentioned in the story are designed to work together, adding a parking center by December 2026 and then more residential and retail units.

In addition to more spaces for cars, the "multi-modal parking center will provide more options for transportation, including biking, scooters and micro-transit options, and a reduced need for vehicles," serving residents, businesses and visitors, Laird said.

"New vibrancy, more businesses and people bringing more 'eyes on the street' will significantly reduce vacancy and safety concerns," she said.

New residents downtown will help support local restaurants and retailers.

Amenities in the plan include a river walk, an outdoor amphitheater and an art walk with rotating exhibitions "that will bring a wonderful arts vibe to the Capital City," Laird said.

City Council President Bill Hare said regional and national attention on Dover is nothing new. The city has places and events that draw people from surrounding states and across the country including Dover Motor Speedway, Bally's casino, the former Firefly concerts and the new Phish music festival, and the air show at Dover Air Force Base.

But he's "surprised" and "delighted" that Dover is featured in Southern Living. He remembers Dover being listed as a good weekend destination on a travel website and another listing the monster-mile statue at Dover Motor Speedway as a unique place for a photo-op. But "the Southern Living article goes well beyond those items for national recognition."

Hare said the projects mentioned in the article are the start of the master plan for redevelopment created by Mosaic, a diverse group of planners, along with business owners, residents and government leaders, guided by the Downtown Development Partnership.

"Every ... city in America has changed dramatically since World War II. The 'downtown' that was the heartbeat of cities needed more attention than just the City Council and the mayor provide," Hare said. "It needed some group of stakeholders to concentrate on what to do make the downtown viable."

He said the “full vision of the plan calls for tying together the cornerstone institutions,” including Dover Air Force Base, the Kent campus of Bayhealth Hospital, Delaware State University, Delaware Technical Community College and state government buildings, with “a range of housing from affordable to high end.”

Those key “institutions” are what made Dover an attractive place to start a business for Donny Legans, who opened his beer garden, Rail Haus, last year on North West Street downtown.

“We knew Dover had good bones and those elements would be a successful combination for us because they bring in a variety of people,” Legans said. “The diversity is also important. We have a mix of ages and races in Dover.”

Mayor Robin Christiansen said he’s pleased to see the magazine’s recognition for “our effort to showcase Dover as a great place to live, work and play.”

The projects highlighted in the magazine “will enhance the heart of our city, and a healthy heart equates to a healthy, growing, vital city,” he said.

Why is Delaware considered to be in the South?

Southern Living’s deputy editor said Dover was included in the readers’ survey because the magazine’s coverage area extends from Delaware and Maryland south to Florida and west to Texas and Oklahoma.

“We cover Delaware frequently,” Cericola said. “Our readers love small towns and beach towns.”

Examples of Delaware stories can be seen on the Southern Living website in a Delaware search.

While Delaware could be considered on the border of the South, a notable boundary that puts the state in the North is the Mason-Dixon line, said Sam Hoff, professor emeritus of history and political science at Delaware State University.

The Mason-Dixon survey in the mid-1700s was brought up in the 1820 Missouri Compromise about how slavery would be dealt with as states were admitted into the United States, a dividing line of “free states” and those that practiced slavery, Hoff said. In general, states below the Mason-Dixon line were considered slave states.

While slavery existed in Delaware, the state is north and east of the Mason-Dixon line and fought with the Union during the Civil War.

“Slavery in the state had been reduced from its peak by about 90% by the time of the Civil War, but Delaware was one of four states, despite continuing slavery, that did not leave the Union,” Hoff said.

While Delaware fought for the Union and housed Confederate prisoners of war, it was split on the subject of slavery, Hoff said.

Delaware didn’t ratify the 13th Amendment prohibiting slavery. The amendment was passed by the three-quarters of states needed to become an amendment to the Constitution, without Delaware’s approval.

Other reasons for a Southern reputation are less controversial — a rural, agricultural heritage, especially below the canal, and a moderate climate, usually without harsh winters.

List of 'The South’s Best Cities on the Rise' in Southern Living magazine

1. Wilmington, North Carolina
2. Franklin, Tennessee
3. Spartanburg, South Carolina
4. Huntsville, Alabama
5. Columbia, South Carolina
6. New Braunfels, Texas
7. Bowling Green, Kentucky
8. Cary, North Carolina
9. Alpharetta, Georgia
10. Bentonville, Arkansas
11. Covington, Louisiana
12. Gulfport, Mississippi

13. Palm Bay, Florida
14. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
15. Georgetown, Texas
16. Frederick, Maryland
17. Gainesville, Georgia
18. Clarksville, Tennessee
19. Hattiesburg, Mississippi
20. Morgantown, West Virginia
21. North Port, Florida
22. Lake Charles, Louisiana
23. Reston, Virginia
24. Edmond, Oklahoma
25. Dover, Delaware

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