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Researchers launch study to find out if Boise is indeed 'nice'

By Brooke Strickland | September 28, 2021

Boise: many feel there's no other city quite like it. It is described as not only lovely and rich with history, but as having a special sense of community that simply isn't found in other parts of the country. Why do you love it here?

It probably has a bit to do with "Boise Nice."

This term, which came about with the Boise Nice Project, encompasses everything about the city — the generosity of Boiseans, the beauty of the city and the natural landscape that serves as its backdrop. The project was created to identify and preserve the multitude of special things that makes living and working in Boise so unique. To do this, the organization has assembled a team and board to conduct research via a survey that will provide information that can be shared with community leaders.

The survey will be available on the Boise Nice website through mid-October. Once data is collected and analyzed, team members will make results available. The project will span 10 years, allowing them to repeat and continue the research process, while comparing attributes to see if anything has changed.

Rourke O'Brien, president and co-founder of Boise Nice, said, "Boise isn't an accident. Several actions were taken to create the welcoming, neighborly atmosphere that makes Boise nice." Research findings will supply us with information both now and over time that can be shared with community leaders and all members, providing us with actionable guidance to protect this most precious gem."



Michael Freeman. Submitted photo

Michael Freeman, senior public relations and marketing manager for Boise Metro Chamber, explained that the project will have a long-lasting impact on the city. "The Boise Nice Project survey is about uncovering some of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of community life in the Treasure Valley," he said. "Idahoans in general have a well-earned reputation for being friendly and helpful to one another. What if we could prove that reputation to be statistically and anecdotally true? It certainly could help reinforce and market those ideas to companies considering doing business here, as well as skilled employees, which many businesses are currently short on."

Jack Marr, international business professor at Boise State University's College of Business and Economics and lead researcher on the project, said that asking the question "How nice is your city?" is something that is mentioned often but is difficult to answer. There are plenty of lists about cities as it relates to their livability, convenience and amenities, but it's harder to quantify the "niceness" of a city. "We wanted to make this something that could not only be measured but put into a comparable set of measurements elsewhere that we could build on," said Marr.

After debate on how and what to measure, team members decided to use the widely cited prosocial tendencies measure (PTM) as a baseline, because they thought it was the closest way to approximate the kind of "niceness" that the Boise Nice Project is looking for.

Marr said: "The PTM looks a lot at the motivations for acts of kindness — why are you nice? What do you expect to gain from it and from whom? Is kindness a motivating factor for you? In addition to this, we are looking at where people visiting Boise place it in their own perceptions of niceness. This is important, as people vary a lot on how they define "nice" behaviors, and it is a lot easier to measure anti-social behaviors, such as crime rate, than pro-social such as picking up a stranger's trash when no one is looking."

The research findings are expected to benefit the community in a variety of ways. For businesses, Marr believes, like Freeman, that positive findings on Boise's friendliness can open the door for additional talent and resources to flow into the city.

"In other research work, I have found that people will take a lower salary to be around the activities they love, but in the long term will be higher earners and have higher asset values than in places without those attributes," Marr said. "I did not look at niceness in that work, so having a measure will be useful. I suspect it too will play a similar role. All of this points to happy, thriving communities in the long-term which businesses need to support themselves — whether large or small."

When it comes to attracting more young people to Boise State University, Marr shares that the research findings in this survey will be a means for continued growth. He explained, "Aside from contributing to our mission as a research university, I think that Boise State benefits greatly from being in the heart of such a nice — both intrinsically and extrinsically — place. It is a clear point of both pride and growth for us. Being able to better track this in a systematic way will be a good resource."

Whether it's striking up a conversation in line at the grocery store, chatting with new friends at an impromptu barbecue, or helping an elderly neighbor mow their lawn, one thing is clear: Boise's "niceness" is evident.

O'Brien said, "Simply stated, Boise Nice means we want you to feel you belong here and have a stake in the well-being of your community."



A screenshot of the Boise Nice website. Screenshot taken by Abx Stevens



Rourke O'Brien. Submitted photo

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