

The American City Flag Survey of 2004

Edward B. Kaye

Raven 9/10, American City Flags, documented the flags of the 100 largest cities in the U.S., all 50 state capitals, and at least two cities per state—150 flags in all. The culmination of many years of research by NAVA members led by former president John Purcell, it focused scholarly attention on a broad and representative range of U.S. municipal flags for the first time since 1915. The book scrupulously avoided judgments of the quality of the designs.

However, NAVA members and many others have long decried the relatively poor level of city vexillography in the United States. Having conducted a successful and widely-publicized survey of state and provincial flag designs in 2001 (published in *Raven 8*), NAVA followed its “hands-off” scholarly effort on city flags with a “hands-on” survey of their quality, with spectacular results.

The American City Flag Survey

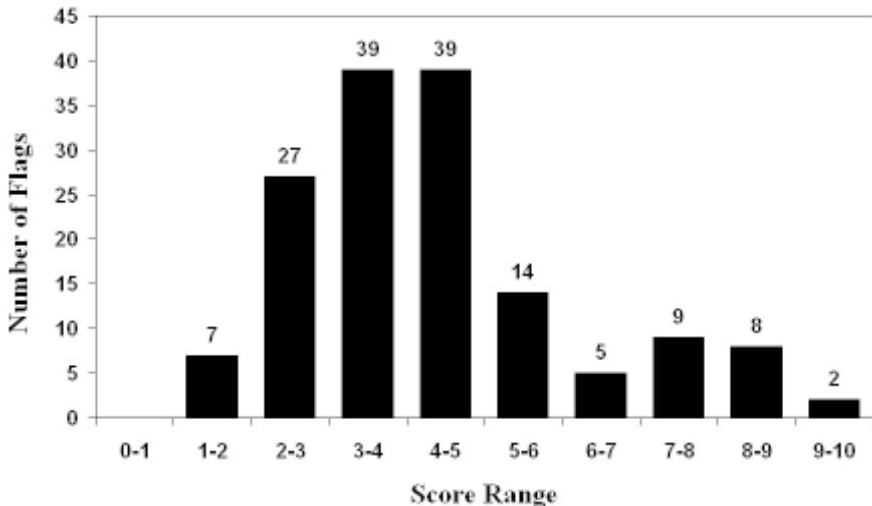
In 2004 NAVA hosted an Internet-based survey asking NAVA members and any visitors to the NAVA web site to rate the design qualities of the flags appearing in the just-published *American City Flags*. The survey debuted on the NAVA website in May and ran until the end of September. Former NAVA webmaster Dick Gideon designed it and NAVA past pres-

ident David Martucci provided the artwork. We publicized the survey in *NAVA News*, to the NAVA e-mail list, on the Flags of the World web site (www.fotw.net), and in *American Vexillum Magazine* (www.americanvexillum.com). Respondents to the 2001 state/provincial survey received an e-mail notice. We didn't want to promote the survey any further, for fear of partisan participation—people responding just to vote for a specific flag (as had occurred briefly in 2001—for Texas).

As before, participants rated the design qualities of the 150 flags on a 0–10 scale, with 10 being the best score. They were asked to rely on their personal sense of good flag design in rating the flags. The full-color image of each flag appeared on the web site, nearly 2 inches high and in correct proportions. The survey was more than twice as long as its predecessor, taking 20 to 40 minutes to complete. Still, responses came in from 66 NAVA members and 415 members of the public, even more than in the 2001 survey.

As before, the scores from NAVA members and non-NAVA members were nearly the same—4.38 and 4.31. (Scores represented the average [arithmetic mean] of all the ratings given for a flag. The survey form forced an integer rating for every flag design, so each respondent scored all

Chart 1: Distribution of Scores



150 flags.) We reported the NAVA member scores to the press, and use them in this analysis to match the methodology used in 2001.

The results weren't surprising (see Appendix for a complete list). The winners were strong, simple, brightly-colored, and distinctive flags; the losers had complicated designs, city seals, or writing on them. The top three scores were around 9 points; the top ten flags all scored above 8 points. But three-quarters of the city flags scored below 5 points. Seven flags received below 2 points, even lower than the record-low 2.36 received in 2001 by the (now-former) state flag of Georgia.

The scores could be converted to more-familiar letter grades, where 8-10 = A, 6-8 = B, 2-4 = D, 4-6 = C, and 0-2 = F. This conversion helped explain the results to some observers.

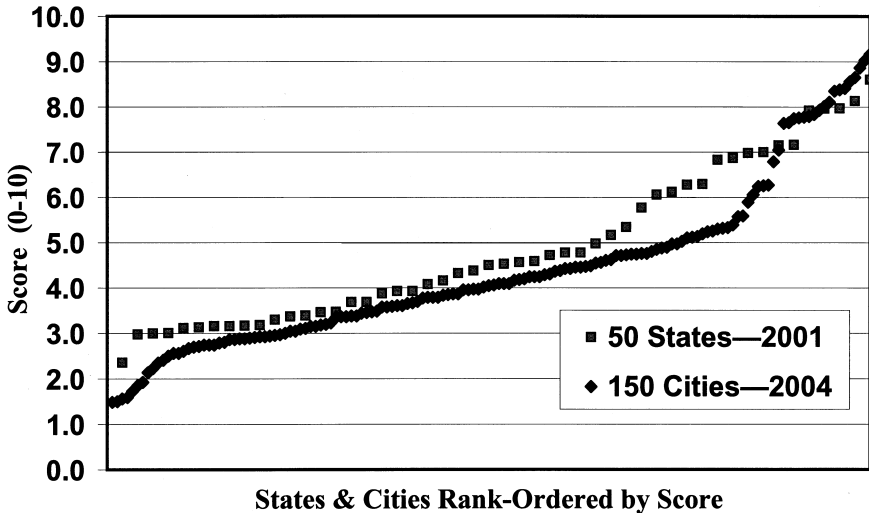
Grade (Score)	Count
A (8-10)	10
B (6-8)	14
C (4-6)	53
D (2-4)	66
F (0-2)	<u>7</u>
	150

Using this descriptive methodology, the average grade for an American city flags was a C-, with only 24 flags getting a B- grade or better.

NAVA members did not agree, of course, on every score, but their ratings were reasonably consistent. The average standard deviation of NAVA member scores across all 150 flags was 1.9 points (for the public it was 2.2 points). This compares to the 2001 survey where those figures were 2.2 and 2.3 points. That means that on average two-thirds of the scores given to a specific flag fell in the range of 2 points above or below the consensus scores in both surveys.

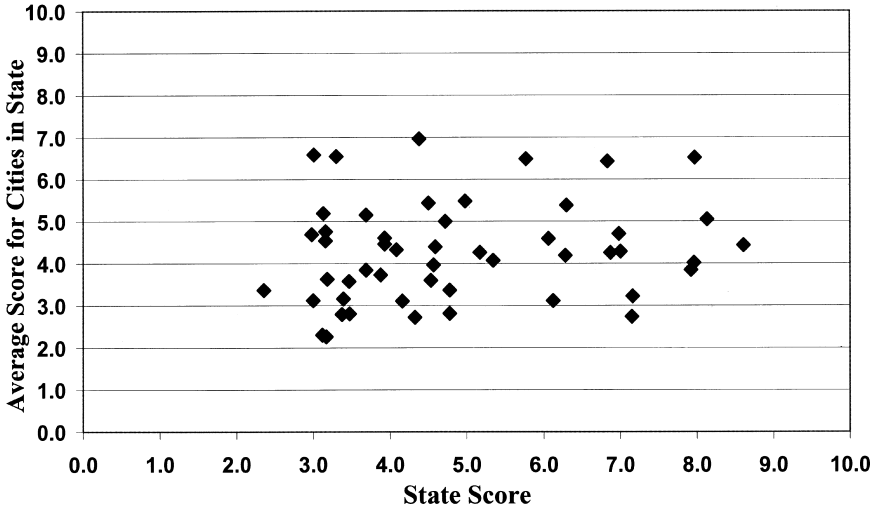
Comparing the surveys, city flags tended to score lower than state flags, averaging 4.3 points versus 5.3 points. Scores were more extreme for city flags as well, with more lower scores and more higher scores.

Chart 2: Comparison of State & City Scores



The correlation between the state flag scores from 2001 and the city flag scores from 2004 was very low: how a state's flag scored did not seem to influence the scores of the flags in its cities. For example, although Arizona's flag scored 7.92, the scores of the five Arizona cities averaged 3.85 and ranged from 1.73 to 8.65. Conversely, although Kansas's flag scored 3.01, its cities scored 4.76 and 8.41. In the following chart, if there were a correlation between the state flag's design quality and that of the flags of the state's cities, the data points would tend to fall on diagonal from the lower left to the upper right. Instead, they appear randomly scattered.

Chart 3: City-State Correlation Is Low



Survey respondents could leave comments as well as scoring flags. These often articulated the consensus opinion in ways a simple score could not. The following section reports the ten best and ten worst city flags, along with their rankings, scores, and actual respondent comments.

TEN BEST AMERICAN CITY FLAGS
(with rankings, scores, and sample comments)



1. Washington, DC (9.17)

I'd recognize Washington, DC's flag anywhere, which is how it should be.



2. Chicago (9.03)

Chicago is the standard by which all US city flags should be judged.



3. Denver (8.86)

The best flags are those that stick close to heraldic design.



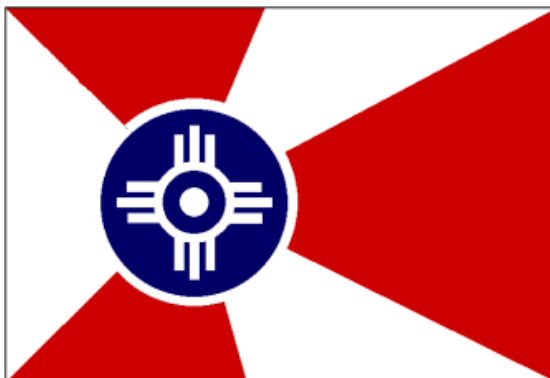
4. Phoenix (8.65)

Best...simple...interesting...the images tells you exactly which city it is.

The flag of St. Louis, Missouri, has a red field. A yellow circle in the center contains a blue fleur-de-lis. A wavy blue and white border, representing the Mississippi River, flows across the flag from the top left to the bottom right, passing behind the central emblem.

5. St. Louis (8.56)

Good design, strong heraldic (and patriotic) colors, and it tells the history of the city



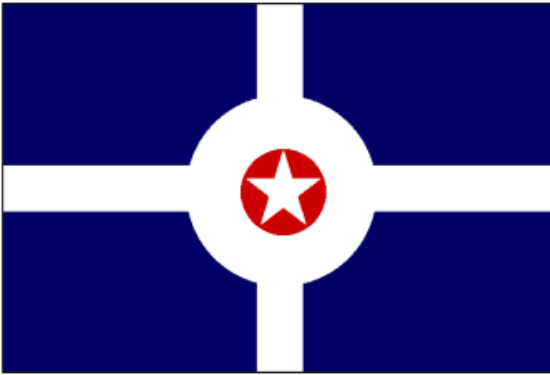
6. Wichita (8.41)

Bummed off of New Mexico, granted, but it works even so.



7. Portland, Oregon (8.38)

Rock on. This one rules, in a Green/Nazi kind of way.



8. Indianapolis (8.35)

Capital and town square effect works for me somehow.



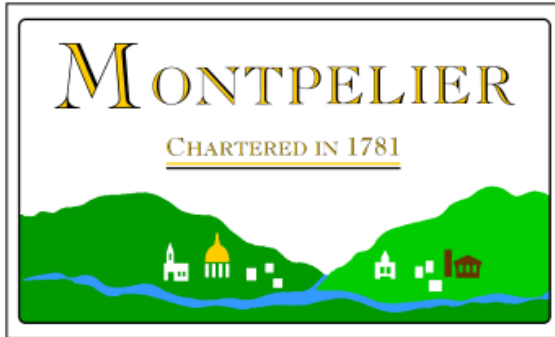
9. Louisville (8.11)

I had no idea that Louisville, Kentucky had such a cool flag!



10. Corpus Christi (8.02)
...simple, evocative, and distinctive.

TEN WORST AMERICAN CITY FLAGS



141. Montpelier (2.35)

*looks like a bumper sticker from the tourist office—
at least the landscape DOES resemble Montpelier.*



142. Cedar Rapids (2.23)

looks like a cheap plastic banner... (and they're such nice people, too).



143. Provo (2.14)

*Cheap gas AND a wide assortment of snacks!... Is the rainbow flash under
the diagonal "Provo" saying that the city is gay-friendly??? Probably not....*



144. Lubbock (1.92)

Had the people designing it never seen a flag? (The flag really deserves a negative score)....Jesus Christ! Are you people on bad honky-tonk acid or something?



145. Hialeah (1.85)

I don't like seals, but crap, make it legible, at least.



146. Mesa (1.73)

Hey look! Gas is 3 cents less than in Provo! "Great People, Quality Service"? What the heck is that all about? Is that supposed to stir civic pride in Mesa?



147. Milwaukee (1.59)

—*is designing a new flag. That's fortunate, because right now it is waayyy too busy.*



148. Rapid City (1.56)

*[This city was a substitute for Sioux Falls, which didn't have a flag.]
Cities need to watch for poor contrasting colors. Yellow on white doesn't work...
difficult to read. A "totally undesigned" flag.*



149. Huntington (1.50)

*The lack of unity wouldn't bother me if it weren't so ugly... "geared" toward gears
gearing for the...I think I gearing get it...
This laughable and completely misconceived flag gets a raspberry.*



150. Pocatello (1.48)

I'd be proud to be from anywhere else.

[Note the copyright notice AND the trademark "TM" symbol]

What Is A Flag?

A flag's purpose is to represent a place, organization, or person, generally on a rectangular piece of cloth, to be seen at a distance, from both sides, often while moving, and reproduced in quantity and in many sizes. Following the principles of good flag design will lead to a successful flag that accomplishes that purpose.

The 5 Basic Principles of Flag Design

- 1. Keep It Simple.** *The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.* . . . Flags flap. Flags drape. Flags must be seen from a distance. Under these circumstances, only simple designs make effective flags. Furthermore, complicated flags cost more to make, which can often limit how widely they are used.
- 2. Use Meaningful Symbolism.** *The flag's images, colors, or patterns should related to what it symbolizes.* . . . Symbolism can be in the form of the "charge" or main graphic element, in the colors used, or sometimes even in the shapes or layout of the parts of the flag. Usually a single primary symbol is best—avoid those that are less likely to be representative or unique.
- 3. Use 2–3 Basic Colors.** *Limit the number of colors on the flag to three, which contrast well and come from the standard color set.* . . . Separate dark colors with a light color, and light colors with a dark color, to help them create effective contrast. A good flag should also reproduce well in "grayscale", that is, in black & white shades. More than four colors are hard to distinguish and make the flag unnecessarily complicated and expensive.
- 4. No Lettering or Seals.** *Never use writing of any kind or an organization's seal.* . . . A flag is a graphic symbol, not a verbal display. Lettering is nearly impossible to read from a distance, hard to sew, and difficult to reduce to lapel-pin size. Words are not reversible. Don't confuse a flag with a banner, to be seen from only one side and closer. Seals were designed for placement on paper to be read at close range—better to use some element from the seal as a symbol.
- 5. Be Distinctive or Be Related.** *Avoid duplicating other flags, but use similarities to show connections.* . . . This perhaps is the most difficult principle, but it is very important. Sometimes the good designs are already "taken". However, a flag's symbols, colors, and shapes can recall other flags—a powerful way to show heritage, solidarity, or connectedness.

And above all, design a flag that looks attractive and balanced to the viewer and to the place, organization, or person it represents!

Figure 1. Key Components of Good Flag, Bad Flag

Survey Conclusions

The highest-scoring flags all embody the five basic principles listed in NAVA's flag-design guide, *Good Flag, Bad Flag*:

1. Keep It Simple
2. Use Meaningful Symbolism
3. Use 2-3 Basic Colors
4. No Lettering or Seals
5. Be Distinctive or Be Related

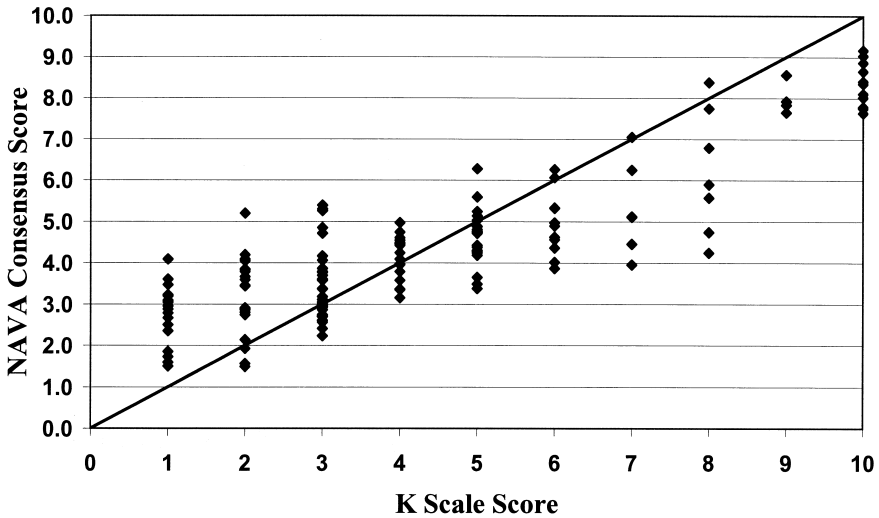
Mason Kaye has proposed a methodology converting these principles to scores in what he calls the "K Scale"—awarding 0, 1, or 2 points for each of the five principles for a total of 0 to 10 points ("The Flags of Portland, Oregon 1916-2002", *Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Vexillology, Stockholm*, August 2003, pp. 416ff.). The results of the K Scale predicted the consensus scores with 89% accuracy. That is, the survey's winners scored the highest on the K Scale, and the losers scored the lowest. (16 of the top 18 flags received a K Scale score of 9 or 10. The average difference between the K scale score and the consensus score was just 1.1 points.)

Put another way, the results of the survey represent a powerful validation of the principles in *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. The high correlation between the subjective survey results and the objective K Scale scores affirms that those five principles successfully capture, if only in a mechanical way, the underlying criteria that respondents used to judge the flags. This is all the more surprising as the five principles purposely omit an important subjective factor: aesthetic attractiveness, which if it *could* be captured objectively might drive the correlation even higher.

In this chart, if the K-Scale score were a perfect predictor, the NAVA consensus scores would fall on the diagonal line. (Mere variability due to differences of opinion would tend to make the actual results vary on the low and high ends. For example, while a flag might rate a 10 on the K

scale, it is unlikely that all respondents would give it the same score, so their consensus would be lower. Also, the K Scale is not entirely objective: while the number of colors in a flag is a completely objective measure, “meaningful symbolism” is necessarily subjective, and different people applying the K Scale might derive slightly different scores for the same flag.) Overall, the chart shows the strong predictive power of the K Scale.

Chart 4: The K Scale’s Predictive Power



A higher-level mathematical analysis of the correlation (too detailed to include here) shows that the data support a regression equation based on the K-Scale score. The survey scores can be predicted with this equation, which starts with a constant amount and weights the individual K Scale scores:

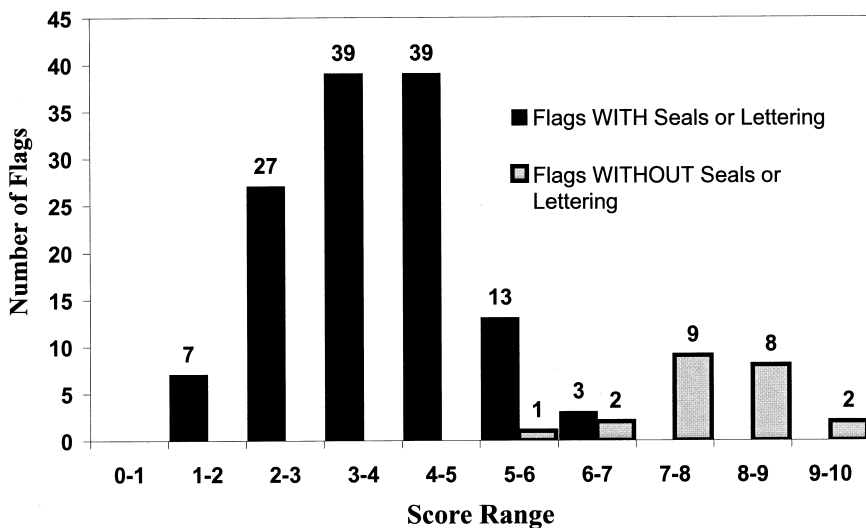
$$\text{Survey Score} = 2.25 + (0.41 * \text{Simplicity}) + (0.57 * \text{Symbolism}) + (0.16 * \text{Colors}) + (1.27 * \text{No Lettering-Seals}) + (0.54 * \text{Distinctiveness})$$

The equation results in an R-Square value of 83% (showing a very high correlation), and shows that the principle explaining the greatest variance was “No Lettering or Seals”, and the principle explaining the least variance was “Use 2–3 Basic Colors”.

Confirming the regression analysis, only 22 of the 150 flags had no lettering or seals—and these accounted for all of the top 20 flags. This is, perhaps, the central issue with U.S. municipal flag design: the maniacal fascination with placing the seal on the flag or writing the city’s name. About 100 flags have a seal or a seal-like object on them; about 50 flags have lettering on them (beyond any lettering in a seal).

In fact, the overall results can be interpreted as two overlapping bell-shaped curves: one centered on 8 points, representing the 22 flags without lettering or seals, and a second centered on 4 points, representing the other 128 flags with lettering or seals (or both!).

Chart 5: Distribution of Scores—Two Curves



The public knows good design. The average score granted by both NAVA members and non-NAVA members was 4.3 points. The average difference between their scores was just over half a point (.59 points); the two groups agreed on 17 of the 20 top scorers. (The low-scorers diverged, mostly because there were so many of them).

Comments from the public and NAVA members showed an articulate understanding of the design issues as well as a sense of humor about the subject.

Some lauded the good in city flags:

The flags I liked the most were simple, evocative, and distinctive.

It's nice to see that there are cities in the US which understand good flag design.

I'm amazed how beautiful some city flags are.

A good flag should be able to be identified without any writing on it.

Many others decried the bad:

American city flags are, generally speaking, a disaster.

A flag should be symbolic; if you have the name of the city written on it I think you've missed the point.

There are a few of these that I doubt have ever been produced in cloth. Sadly, some have.

Good God! Can't this country do any better? Most of these flags are embarrassments. Some look like each member of the city council took a turn adding something to a sheet!

The trouble with most city flags is that they look like CITY flags!

Some flags are reason enough to keep flag burning legal; if I were in Pocatello or Provo, I'd buy up the entire stock of their flags and use them for winter heating!

We also received some interesting feedback:

You obviously lack the centuries of History we have in Europe, which reflects in your flags. (from Portugal)

There is probably more justification to use a city's name on its flag than for state flags, as it is unreasonable to expect non-residents of a city to have the knowledge of a flag design to identify a city flag solely by its design elements. (from Australia)

Whoever doubts that there is an urgent need for a national body of experts that would help communities and corporations choose flags and armorial devices that would be artistically beautiful and symbolically appropriate need only look at the motley rags that dominate this crazy assortment of haphazardly designed banners!

Great site! Thanks for letting me cast my vote!

Press Coverage

NAVA announced the results of the survey in October 2004 to coincide with our 38th annual meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana (fortunately, the Indianapolis flag ranked in the top ten!). We publicized the results through a press release e-mailed, faxed, and called in to city desks nationwide, repeated on the Associated Press wire, and posted on the NAVA web site. In the following months, local newspapers and TV stations reported extensively, as it was a local story in every city.

Several current and former NAVA officers gave dozens of interviews. We counted nearly 100 cities with newspaper stories about their city flags—often likely the first time that citizens knew of their flag. Coverage frequently was quite lengthy and ran on the front page with illustrations.

Many newspapers expressed surprise that their city had a flag. In Wichita, a headline asked “Flag fans love city flag; ever seen it?”¹ Another columnist asked, “Who knew that Omaha even *had* a flag?”² In many cases, the reporters found that only one or a handful of flags existed.

Some compared their cities' flags to those of rival cities, especially within the same or neighboring states. A few even derided distant competitors, such as when the New Orleans paper said that Denver's flag “looks like a

bad 1970s wall hanging” and the flag of Portland, Oregon “resembles a floor tile”.³

The press generally didn’t pull punches when flags were ranked low. TV stations in Utah opined “When you acknowledge the Provo city flag, you might want to put your hand over your eyes instead of your heart.”⁴ Other papers wrote “Our flags are ugly” [Chesapeake and Virginia Beach],⁵ and “Raleigh has a bland old flag”.⁶

Some reports tried for a positive spin, such as the headline in Grand Forks about the flag ranked #73 with a score of 4.09: “GF flag flies above some of the rest; Grand Forks city flag way better than the worst.”⁷ The Albany paper called its city’s flag “more adequate than most.”⁸ Others were appropriately enthusiastic: “Indy Flag Among Top in US”,⁹ “St. Louis Flag 5th in Nation”,¹⁰ and “Irving’s Flag Flies Highest of Area Cities”.¹¹

Very occasionally a newspaper joined in the defense of its city’s flag. In Salem, the paper reeked of sour grapes: “Portland flies the seventh-best flag in the country. Salem’s flag ranks 51st. That’s just fine. Who really cares about city flags?”¹² It did publish my letter to the editor in response, which asserted that “...Salem would be better served by a newspaper arguing for a world-class city flag, rather than implying ‘our flag may be crummy, but it doesn’t matter’.”¹³

Newspapers often referenced or excerpted *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, listing its five principles. Many quoted extensively from *American City Flags* (we had sent copies of the articles to many newspapers). Reporters often did an excellent job explaining the underlying design issues that led to their city flags’ rankings, spending up to an hour on interviews and including insightful commentary in their articles. I tried to emphasize the opportunity that a city flag provides to stimulate civic pride, and my hypothesis that better flags are flown more (because they are more attractive and are less expensive). My favorite quote was “A city seal is important and can say a number of things, but it is like using a pipe wrench to bake a pie—it’s just the wrong tool.”¹⁴

One common angle was making fun of the word “vexillology” or of

the existence of an organization dedicated to the study of flags. Although most reporters opted for “flag experts” (the description provided in our press release), we were also called flag “aficionados”, “fanciers”, “scholars”, “enthusiasts”, and even “freaks”—I believe that was meant as a synonym for “devotees”. A Texas magazine called vexillology “the fancy-pants term for the study of flags”.¹⁵ One paper called NAVA the “The North American Vexillological Society [sic], evidently not a member of the North American Pronounceable Society...”¹⁶ Many expressed wonder that such a field even existed.

However, many reporters seemed to enjoy the story. One wrote “You can see all 150 flags and their rankings at the NAVA web site. You might be surprised at how fun they are to look at.”¹⁷

Public Officials Respond

Many reporters assured balance in their stories by calling city hall for a reaction or comment. Several themes emerged from city officials. When the flags fared well, they waxed enthusiastic. The spokesman for the mayor of top-ranked Washington, DC, said “Wow, that’s a nice compliment...There’s a very powerful argument that the most powerful and poignant icons are the simple ones.”¹⁸ Chicago Mayor Richard Daley’s press office issued a statement saying “We are proud that Chicago’s flag has been given such an honor because it represents the origins of our city as well as its great history and pride.”¹⁹ Cincinnati’s mayor, Charlie Luken, said he was proud of the flag’s #22 ranking, saying “It is a mighty fine-looking flag.”²⁰ And Des Moines City Councilman Archie Brooks “said the new ranking had his spirits flying high.”²¹ Even a middle-ranked flag could get a positive response, such as from Harrisburg’s mayor Stephen Reed, who was “thrilled they recognized Harrisburg has a flag”.²²

When flags fared poorly—a much more common occurrence—officials usually either defended the flag or insisted they had higher priorities. Some heaped scorn on the process, yet others embraced the results and hoped for change.

Among those who staunchly defended their flag was Metro Councilman Joe Greco, a member of the Baton Rouge city council when it adopted a flag that devotes most of its field to the name of the city. “What do they expect for us to write on it? Bogalusa or something like that?”²³ Bridgeport City Council President Andres Ayala, Jr. said “Everyone has individual taste, I guess”, adding that although he was uncertain if the city really had an official flag, he did like the seal: “it says a lot when you look at it, with all the symbols.”²⁴

In San Jose, the mayor’s spokesman said “The spirit of San Jose is in the people, the energy, the spirit and innovation of our community...we stand by our flag.”²⁵ Warwick’s mayor, Scott Avedisian, said his city’s flag “may not be exciting or trendy, but it is a tangible connection to our vibrant and rich history”.²⁶ The spokeswoman for Charleston, S.C. said “If that’s the worst thing they can say about us, that we have an icky flag, then go ahead. We can take it, we’re tough.”²⁷

Those who maintained that they had higher priorities than flags cited street medians (Aurora), drinking water (Provo), crime and joblessness (Fort Wayne), and professional-looking and -acting police officers and firefighters (Riverside). The spokesman for the mayor of Houston said he thought Houstonians cared more “about the quality of life in the neighborhoods beneath the city flag.”²⁸ Of course, they probably do!

Occasionally an official’s defense was more passionate than informed. For example, “‘It’s our flag and we like it, that would be my first thought,’ said [Mobile’s] Mayor Mike Dow [about the flag], which he subsequently could not definitively describe.”²⁹ “‘I think it’s a fine flag,’ said [Pierre’s] Mayor Dennis Eisnach, who discovered the flag after being asked about it.”³⁰

Some attacked the survey process itself. “This is nuts,” said Mayor Raul Martinez of Hialeah, “This is one of the stupidest things I have ever heard in my life—people judging flags.”³¹ Councilman Jim Lane, who helped design Fort Worth’s new flag, said that the NAVA survey “sounds to me like a Yankee conspiracy”.³² The mayor’s assistant in

Pocatello dismissed that city's flag's last-place ranking: "It is just a silly survey".³³

But in many cases, officials were surprisingly open to change and improvement. Provo's spokesman said of the low score earned by the city's flag, "Quite frankly, we agree with their conclusion...We're certainly open to suggestions."³⁴ In Akron, the mayor's chief of staff and the city's spokesman "acknowledged the flag is a failure. 'We agree that the present flag sucks,' they said in unison, using the scientific term that the vexillologists skipped in their critiques."³⁵ The mayor of Riverside, Ron Loveridge, thought "It might be a good idea to have some group, such as the Riverside Arts Council, evaluate the flag in light of the survey."³⁶ And in Bakersfield, "City Manager Alan Tandy said the flag's inadequacies have been weighing heavily on his mind, despite the fact that he hadn't heard about the survey, or the rampaging vexillologists..."³⁷

In Cedar Rapids, the city hall spokesman thought that perhaps the flag ranking was "an opportunity...it might be nice to have a flag that could promote the city, [and] that businesses would want to fly." Even its designer had tried to persuade Cedar Rapids to improve the flag he'd created as a high school student in 1960.³⁸ Similarly, in Grand Forks, the original designer (a graphics professional) now agreed with the "no lettering" principle and offered to redesign the flag, saying "when the city's ready to make that change, let me know...I'll be happy to do it."³⁹ In St. Paul, Mayor Randy Kelly said "No disrespect to the flag we have now, but we could use something a little more dynamic."⁴⁰ And last-place Pocatello is currently working on a new flag. The chairman of its chamber of commerce, Mark Hunter, said "I don't know what the five principles of design are, but I'm hoping the guy designing the flag does."⁴¹

That's Not Our Flag!

The official response in some cities to NAVA's survey results was "That's not our flag!". In several cases the image in the survey was not

what the city considered its flag. (Of course, a front-page story by an inquiring reporter was clearly more powerful in eliciting information from city officials than were solicitations by NAVA researchers directed to generic city offices—the newspapers often unearthed facts that the authors of *American City Flags* had neither the resources nor the leverage to discover.)

In Lubbock, the low-rated “Legendary Lubbock” juke-box design had not officially replaced a 1971 flag adopted after a contest held by the Women’s Club of Lubbock, and officials there insisted that the logo was never designed to go on a flag.⁴²

Fort Worth had changed its flag during the survey, replacing the horizontal stripes with a solid white field and replacing the stylized longhorn with a more traditional image of “Molly”, the city-mascot longhorn cow depicted on the front of Fort Worth’s Livestock Exchange Building.⁴³

Mesa officials disputed the survey results, saying “The ‘flag’ used in the survey was an event banner that’s hung at trade shows and promotional events.” Flagless Mesa had apparently sent the NAVA researcher an image of the closest thing it had to a flag. The city’s spokeswoman said “Whatever they rated us on doesn’t fall under the classification of a flag”. (See “New Flags” for the happy ending.)⁴⁴

Garland officials maintained that NAVA rated an out-of-date flag with the city seal, saying “...the flag that flies at City Hall bears our city logo. We adopted that logo in the early 1990s.”⁴⁵

Rapid City mayor Jim Shaw took exception to the 148th-place ranking, saying “That’s not our flag. I wonder where that came from?”. While NAVA had used an image e-mailed by a city official, the mayor described a flag with all the same elements, a design he considered “more attractive”, as it had the words “Rapid City” and “South Dakota” at the top and bottom, a star in the middle along with an image of Mount Rushmore, and gold trim.⁴⁶

Due to the merger of Louisville with Jefferson County, the city's top-ten-ranked flag had actually been replaced in 2003, as *American City Flags* was being finalized. The new metro flag "features a dark blue field and a fleur-de-lis circled by the words Louisville, Jefferson County, and Metro."⁴⁷

Rochester's official city flag apparently does not even fly at city hall, having been supplanted by an unofficial but more attractive banner (as reported in *American City Flags*).⁴⁸

Since the publication of *American City Flags*, Tallahassee had replaced its flag with a new one, a design bearing a stylized star and the words "City of Tallahassee" which cost the city \$45,000 and likely would have scored even lower than its predecessor.⁴⁹

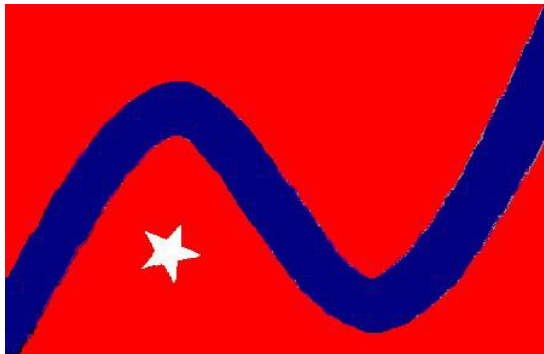
The spokesman for Springfield asked "Do we get to appeal the judge's ruling? We went through this a few years ago...the wording 'Springfield, Illinois' is not on the official flag. It's been added by some." Although the paper reported "It was not immediately clear who gave NAVA the incorrect version of the Springfield flag", the spokesman admitted "Funding being difficult to obtain, we haven't replaced all of them. I think the one in the city council chambers says 'Springfield, Illinois'".⁵⁰

New Flags

But some newspapers formally editorialized for improvement: "Maybe it's time to redesign the banner flying over Portland [Maine]".⁵¹ "It does appear Akron still is searching for that one icon that would stamp Akron for all time as a city that is not what it used to be. The city flag would be redesigned to incorporate the emblem. Until then, we trust our spiffy new downtown slogan, 'So much, so close', will make up for the shortcomings of the city flag."⁵² "And yes, we're all proud to be Pocatello—or at least we should be. Taking advice from flag experts and improving our marketing image to the rest of the world isn't a bad first step."⁵³

One survey respondent wrote, with prescience: “If the results of this survey prompt a city to change a flag for the better, it will be worth it.” At least four cities, or their newspapers, are taking active steps in pursuit of a new flag—some with NAVA’s direct help. The mayor of Salt Lake City, Rocky Anderson, convened a six-member panel to oversee a contest on behalf of his city to find “a more modern design to replace its current white flag, which was created in the 1960s and has small, pioneer designs.” With great insight, he placed two local flag-company employees on the panel.⁵⁴

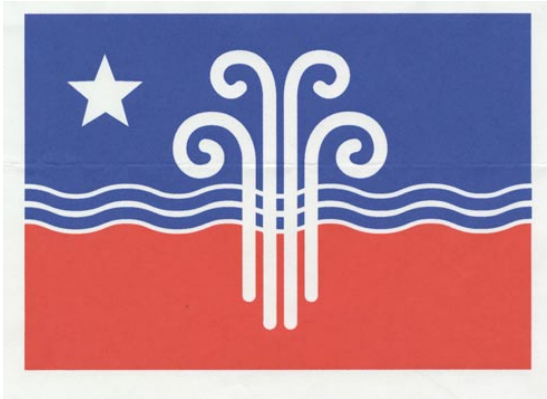
The Nashville newspaper ran a facetious contest for a new city flag, saying “So, we want you, our arty, smarty reader, to come up with your official Nashville flag. Our rules: Go wild.”⁵⁵ Despite its frivolous tone, the contest (which offered a locally-manufactured Singer sewing machine as first prize) received some serious entries and produced a winning design that could easily serve as the city’s new flag. The blue river on a red field represents the Cumberland, “a vital part of the city’s past and future”, and the white star represents Nashville, the state capital. The artist’s inspiration was the Denver city flag, which highlights that city’s mountains.⁵⁶



New flag design for Nashville

In Kansas City, the newspaper sponsored a formal city flag contest, which received 250 entries. The staff culled them down to 20 finalists, asking a panel of NAVA judges to score them. The winning design centered a stylized fountain over wavy horizontal lines representing the Missouri river, on a field of blue over red and with a white star in the upper

hoist.⁵⁷ However, the lack of advance acceptance of the contest by city officials lowered the likelihood that it would actually succeed in changing the flag.



New flag design for Kansas City

However, in Mesa, a local columnist and assistant city editor launched a successful effort to create and adopt a new city flag. Paul Giblin of the *East Valley Tribune* secured assurance from the mayor that the city council would consider designs if he conducted a contest. After receiving 131 entries, which a NAVA panel culled to 24 finalists, he asked readers to vote. The winning design showed a yellow mesa (which could double as an “M”) under a blue sky, with a blue saguaro cactus against a rayed sun rising over the mesa.⁵⁸ It was adopted as Mesa’s flag in February 2005.⁵⁹



New flag design for Mesa

Conclusions

NAVA members and the public provided a broadly-based quantitative consensus regarding the design quality of municipal flags in the U.S. One respondent, Kaihsu Tai, reflected the collective opinion of the hundreds of people who participated in our survey, calling the flags "...a few very striking designs in a sea of tedium".

The designer of the Jefferson City flag, David Woodside, inadvertently summed up perhaps the key issue in American city flag design, in explaining why he would keep the words *Jefferson City*: "Strangers to the city might not know what the flag represents otherwise."⁶⁰ In press interviews, I tried to make the point that instant unprompted identification was too high a standard to demand of any flag—there is certainly nothing intrinsic in the flags of France, China, or the U.S. that would allow the first-time viewer to identify what they represent. Rather, a city's flag should be instantly recognizable, at a distance, once the viewer has learned its design.

The survey repeated the success of 2001, giving NAVA a vast amount of exposure across the U.S. through intensive press coverage—often on the front page—in two-thirds of the cities whose flags we surveyed. NAVA's web site, usually a placid outpost of interesting flag information receiving about 100,000 "hits" per month, saw 400,000 hits in a single day in October.

We increased people's awareness of their city's flags, of their flags' relative design quality, and of the study of flags in general. As NAVA member Lee Herold wrote: "That flags make a difference and are important is part of the vital core of NAVA. Nothing NAVA has done before has reached so many people, advertised our existence so widely, and shown so clearly that the subject of our interest has value. This is NAVA at its best. So once again, congratulations."

The survey helped present flag scholarship to the public, reaching far more readers than could *American City Flags*, and turned up new information resulting from reporters' inquiries that has added to our knowledge.

It also instigated improvements—planting the seeds of change in many cities that have already borne fruit.

The survey also validated the basic principles espoused by *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, giving NAVA a strong analytical foundation for its promotion and guidance of flag design in North America.

While some might bemoan the sad state of municipal vexillography in our country, this instead can be considered a tremendous opportunity for improvement. Those NAVA members—vexillonaires—who see intervention as an appropriate extension of scholarship, have a strong role to play in encouraging U.S. cities to adopt better flags.



An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 38th NAVA Meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana in October 2004 as “American City Flags, the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”.

Endnotes

1. *Wichita Eagle*, 10/6/04
2. *Omaha World-Herald*, 12/29/04
3. *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 11/24/04
4. KUTV-2 (Salt Lake City), 10/8/04
5. *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, 11/28/04
6. *Raleigh News & Observer*, 12/27/04
7. *Grand Forks Herald*, 11/24/04
8. *Albany Times-Union*, 11/30/04
9. WHTR-13 (Indianapolis), 11/28/04
10. KSDK-5 (St. Louis), 11/1/04
11. *Dallas News*, 11/29/04
12. *Salem Statesman-Journal*, 12/10/04
13. *Ibid.*, 12/17/04
14. *Bakersfield Californian*, 11/10/04
15. *D Magazine* (Dallas), March 2005
16. *Stockton Record*, 11/19/04
17. *Omaha World-Herald*, 12/29/04
18. *Washington Post*, 10/28/04
19. *Chicago Daily Southtown*, 10/13/04
20. *Cincinnati Post*, 11/23/04
21. *Des Moines Register*, 10/6/04
22. WGAL-8 (Harrisburg), 12/1/04
23. *Baton Rouge Advocate*, 11/20/04
24. *Bridgeport News*, 11/11/04
25. *San Jose Mercury News*, 11/21/04
26. *Warwick Beacon*, 11/18/04
27. *Charleston Post & Courier*, 11/29/04
28. *Houston Chronicle*, 10/31/04
29. *Mobile Register*, 12/27/04
30. *Pierre Capital-Journal*, 11/22/04
31. *Miami Herald*, 11/27/04
32. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 12/1/04

33. *Miami Herald*, 11/27/04
34. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 10/11/04
35. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 11/9/04
36. *Riverside Press-Enterprise*, 12/31/04
37. *Bakersfield Californian*, 11/10/04
38. *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 11/12/04
39. *Grand Forks Herald*, 11/24/04
40. *Twin Cities [St. Paul] Pioneer Press*, 11/23/04
41. *Columbus Dispatch*, 11/22/04
42. *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, 11/4/04
43. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 12/1/04
44. *East Valley Tribune*, 10/31/04
45. *Dallas Morning News*, 11/29/04
46. *Black Hills [Rapid City] Pioneer*, 12/2/04
47. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 10/24/04
48. *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 12/6/04
49. *Tallahasee Democrat*, 11/4/04
50. *Springfield State Journal-Register*, 11/1/04
51. *Portland [Maine] Press Herald*, 10/21/04
52. *Akron Beacon Journal*, 11/10/04
53. *Idaho State Journal*, 10/11/04
54. *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), 12/1/04
55. *Nashville Tennessean*, 12/9/04
56. *Ibid.*, 1/15/05
57. *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/05
58. *East Valley Tribune*, 3/8/05
59. *NAVA News* #185, Jan.-Mar. 2005, pp 8-11
60. *Jefferson City News-Leader*, 12/20/04

Appendix: Survey Scores (NAVA Members)

[10 = highest; 0 = lowest; n = 66]

1	Washington	D.C.	9.17
2	Chicago	Illinois	9.03
3	Denver	Colorado	8.86
4	Phoenix	Arizona	8.65
5	St. Louis	Missouri	8.56
6	Wichita	Kansas	8.41
7	Portland	Oregon	8.38
8	Indianapolis	Indiana	8.35
9	Louisville	Kentucky	8.11
10	Corpus Christi	Texas	8.02
11	Madison	Wisconsin	7.92
12	Jackson	Mississippi	7.83
13	San Antonio	Texas	7.79
14	Des Moines	Iowa	7.77
15	Richmond	Virginia	7.76
16	New Orleans	Louisiana	7.74
17	Irving	Texas	7.65
18	Baltimore	Maryland	7.64
19	Colorado Springs	Colorado	7.05
20	Fremont	California	6.79
21	Dallas	Texas	6.27
22	Cincinnati	Ohio	6.26
23	St. Petersburg	Florida	6.24
24	Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	6.06
25	Albuquerque	New Mexico	5.89
26	Omaha	Nebraska	5.59
27	Minneapolis	Minnesota	5.58
28	Annapolis	Maryland	5.39
29	Anchorage	Alaska	5.33
30	Seattle	Washington	5.32
31	Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	5.30
32	Buffalo	New York	5.26
33	Los Angeles	California	5.24
34	Albany	New York	5.20
35	San Francisco	California	5.14

36	Fresno	California	5.12
37	New York	New York	5.11
38	Jacksonville	Florida	5.03
39	Birmingham	Alabama	4.97
40	Sacramento	California	4.97
41	Springfield	Illinois	4.89
42	Wilmington	Delaware	4.88
43	Nashville	Tennessee	4.85
44	St. Paul	Minnesota	4.80
45	Montgomery	Alabama	4.76
46	Topeka	Kansas	4.76
47	Oakland	California	4.74
48	Shreveport	Louisiana	4.74
49	Fort Smith	Arkansas	4.73
50	Charleston	West Virginia	4.71
51	Salem	Oregon	4.71
52	Fort Wayne	Indiana	4.62
53	Rochester	New York	4.61
54	Memphis	Tennessee	4.56
55	Houston	Texas	4.55
56	Raleigh	North Carolina	4.48
57	San Diego	California	4.47
58	Arlington	Texas	4.45
59	Cleveland	Ohio	4.45
60	Casper	Wyoming	4.42
61	Riverside	California	4.42
62	Austin	Texas	4.38
63	Jefferson City	Missouri	4.36
64	Concord	New Hampshire	4.30
65	Tallahassee	Florida	4.29
66	Charlotte	North Carolina	4.24
67	Fort Worth	Texas	4.24
68	Trenton	New Jersey	4.24
69	Chesapeake	Virginia	4.20
70	Miami	Florida	4.18
71	Detroit	Michigan	4.17
72	Columbus	Ohio	4.09
73	Grand Forks	North Dakota	4.09
74	Harrisburg	Pennsylvania	4.09
75	Little Rock	Arkansas	4.06

76	Mobile	Alabama	4.05
77	Worcester	Massachusetts	4.02
78	San Jose	California	3.97
79	Tampa	Florida	3.97
80	Baton Rouge	Louisiana	3.95
81	Cheyenne	Wyoming	3.95
82	Newark	New Jersey	3.86
83	Plano	Texas	3.86
84	Carson City	Nevada	3.85
85	Columbia	South Carolina	3.83
86	Garland	Texas	3.79
87	Jersey City	New Jersey	3.79
88	Lincoln	Nebraska	3.79
89	Dover	Delaware	3.77
90	Long Beach	California	3.70
91	El Paso	Texas	3.67
92	Santa Ana	California	3.65
93	Las Vegas	Nevada	3.61
94	Toledo	Ohio	3.61
95	Bismarck	North Dakota	3.59
96	Atlanta	Georgia	3.58
97	Augusta	Maine	3.58
98	Greensboro	North Carolina	3.48
99	Salt Lake City	Utah	3.47
100	Stockton	California	3.45
101	Warwick	Rhode Island	3.44
102	Glendale	Arizona	3.38
103	Kansas City	Missouri	3.38
104	Aurora	Colorado	3.36
105	Grand Rapids	Michigan	3.36
106	Billings	Montana	3.35
107	Burlington	Vermont	3.23
108	Lansing	Michigan	3.20
109	Olympia	Washington	3.18
110	Augusta	Georgia	3.15
111	Spokane	Washington	3.15
112	Lexington	Kentucky	3.11
113	Bakersfield	California	3.09
114	Boise	Idaho	3.05
115	Pierre	South Dakota	3.05

116	Norfolk	Virginia	3.00
117	Santa Fe	New Mexico	2.97
118	Manchester	New Hampshire	2.95
119	Hartford	Connecticut	2.94
120	Glendale	California	2.92
121	Gulfport	Mississippi	2.92
122	Honolulu	Hawaii	2.91
123	Helena	Montana	2.89
124	Tulsa	Oklahoma	2.88
125	Virginia Beach	Virginia	2.88
126	Akron	Ohio	2.86
127	Yonkers	New York	2.86
128	Scottsdale	Arizona	2.80
129	Providence	Rhode Island	2.79
130	Oklahoma City	Oklahoma	2.74
131	Portland	Maine	2.74
132	Tacoma	Washington	2.74
133	Boston	Massachusetts	2.71
134	Juneau	Alaska	2.70
135	Tucson	Arizona	2.67
136	Charleston	South Carolina	2.61
137	Anaheim	California	2.56
138	Maui	Hawaii	2.56
139	Bridgeport	Connecticut	2.50
140	Frankfort	Kentucky	2.41
141	Montpelier	Vermont	2.35
142	Cedar Rapids	Iowa	2.23
143	Provo	Utah	2.14
144	Lubbock	Texas	1.92
145	Hialeah	Florida	1.85
146	Mesa	Arizona	1.73
147	Milwaukee	Wisconsin	1.59
148	Rapid City	South Dakota	1.56
149	Huntington	West Virginia	1.50
150	Pocatello	Idaho	1.48

