

USA Today, Rand McNally name Sandpoint most beautiful small town in America



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By CAMERON RASMUSSEN/Hagadone News Network

SANDPOINT - While locals already know they live in one of the most beautiful places on Earth, the rest of the nation is catching on.

Business owners and advocates alike are celebrating the news that judges from the USA Today and Rand McNally Best of the Road competition have chosen Sandpoint as the most beautiful small town in America. Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce President Kate McAlister said she hopes the honor and its associated publicity will help bring an economic bump to the tourism hot spot.

"That was the impetus behind pursuing this," she said. "We were working to bring a little more attention to the town and the businesses here."

Sandpoint had always been on the radar, but victory hinged on contest participants Dan and JoAnne Schaub's successful visit. The other towns in competition planned their every move and lavished them with parties and gifts. McAlister took a different approach. She presented them with a list of popular Sandpoint activities and assured them that she would make the arrangements.

"They were really grateful about that," McAlister said. "They said that no other town up to that point had given them any choice."

The Schaub family spent their time in Sandpoint engaging in recreation that longtime residents know and love. They took a spin around Lake Pend Oreille, rode the Schweitzer lift to check out the scenery and hung out at the Pend d'Oreille Winery. During their visit, business owners and residents alike welcomed them like old friends. McAlister said it didn't hurt that the weather was perfect, either.

"We couldn't have planned it better," she said.

At the end of their trip, the Schaub family arrived in Los Angeles to review their travel journals with a panel of judges. Based on the Schaub family's support and Sandpoint's glowing replication through their documentation, the town won the day against much larger competitors Coral Gables, Fla., Marco Island, Fla., Franklin, Tenn., Baker City, Ore., and Pacifica, Calif. After all, the contest defined "small town" as a population of 150,000 or less.

"I texted the Schaub family after I found out that we'd won," McAlister said. "They texted me back and said, 'We love Sandpoint, and we'll definitely be back.'"

The contest victory brings along a slew of publicity. A page in both the upcoming Rand McNally atlas and an issue of USA Today will be dedicated to the town. An hour-long Travel Channel special will also feature the contest winners.

Although some residents don't care for the increased crowds that the publicity draws, McAlister said that the attention's economic benefits are worth it in the long run.

"Some people like the town not to be crowded, but the reality is that we're a tourist economy," she said. "This is more than a contest for us. It's about sustainability."

As McAlister celebrates the publicity victory, she gives the credit to all the businesses and residents that made such a good impression on the Schaub family.

"The most remarkable thing to the Schaub family was the people here," she said. "It sounds cliché, but it took the whole village. We all did it."