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8 Cities for Downtown Living

These locales' Main Streets are the main attraction for many relocating retirees.

> BY MATTHEW ZABEL

RICK HUGHES isn't ready to retire quite yet. But when the real estate agent and his wife sought a place to relocate, they chose a city with all their desired characteristics when that time comes. They looked for a small town with the benefits

and amenities of a larger city. They required a locale with opportunities to continue learning and remain active and engaged. And they wanted those amenities to be within walking distance of home.

They found Sarasota on Florida's Gulf Coast. "Sarasota is a big little city with the cultural amenities you'd find in a major metro area,"

says Rick, 57, who moved from Cambridge, MD, with Peg, 61, still employed as a social worker.

Nationwide, as adults approach retirement, they increasingly seek cities such as Sarasota that allow them to live close to dining, shopping and entertainment. Christopher Leinberger, professor at George Washington University School of Business and a nonresident senior

fellow at the Brookings Institution, has observed this trend among baby boomers for years. Many lived in suburbs, away from the central city, for much of their careers, and now they want everything close by, he says.

After World War II, the momentum went away from downtowns, shifting to the construction of outlying areas. "People forget that building suburbs was a radical change from how we built cities," Leinberger says. "We had cars that we didn't have before, so we didn't need to be close to work. We could drive there. Now the pendulum has swung back and more people are looking for a walkable urban area."

The trend is nurturing revitalization in city centers and is sparking walkable suburban developments that include shops, restaurants, markets and entertainment venues in addition to residences.

Retiree relocation is a big part of the trend. These eight cities have vibrant downtowns with plenty of captivating living options, too.

Charlotte, North Carolina

Mitch and Karen Eisner, both 59, moved to the Charlotte area in south-central North Carolina from New York City in 1998 with retirement in mind. They lived at a few Charlotte addresses until 2017, when they relocated to Trilogy Lake Norman. It's 20 miles northwest of the city's Uptown district, where the couple frequent the Blumenthal Performing Arts center and numerous theaters.

"There are fantastic restaurants — any type of food you like," says Mitch, a retired school principal. The couple's favorites are Chima Brazilian Steakhouse, Luciano's Ristorante Italiano

and Amelie's French Bakery and Cafe, where they often stop after a show.

Karen, a former information technology consultant, says they experience all four seasons and attend a variety of arts and sporting events. And most importantly, the city feels safe.

"I don't hesitate to walk at night in Charlotte," Mitch says. "Coming out of an NBA game (to see the Charlotte Hornets), the streets are well-lit, safe and clean."

Back home at Trilogy Lake Norman, the couple enjoy activities and amenities such as cooking classes, a pool, restaurant and much more.

Charlotte has an international airport and daytrip proximity to the coast and the mountains. The city checks a lot of boxes for relocating retirees, says Jay Seymoure, the community's general manager. "The most appealing aspect is that it is scaled appropriately. It has enough of a downtown feel that you satisfy that big-city itch."

Population: 842,051 in Charlotte and 1,076,837 in Mecklenburg County

Climate:

January: High 51° / Low 30°

July: High 89° / Low 68°

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The median sales price in Charlotte was \$250,000 for single-family homes and \$187,500 for townhouses and condos in the first quarter, according to the Carolina Multiple



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Listing Services Inc.

Information: Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, CharlotteChamber.com. Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, CharlottesGotALot.com.

El Paso, Texas

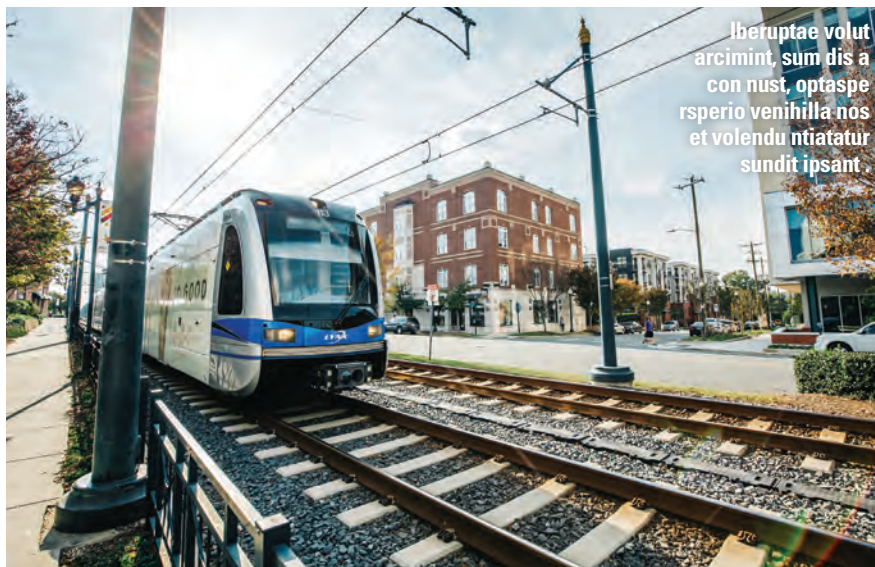
The downtown area reflects the planning that city leaders began more than a decade ago, says Jessica Herrera, director of economic and international development for El Paso, which sits at the western tip of Texas near the New Mexico and Mexico borders. Officials created a tax incentive program in 2006, sparking a downtown revival that includes the renovation of the historic Blue Flame building into housing, the addition of the Triple-A El Paso Chihuahuas baseball team and the rejuvenation of San Jacinto Plaza, which serves as the city's "downtown living room," Herrera says.

Retirees say their dollars go a lot further here. Affordability drew Ben Cheng, 64, from Southern California to El Paso in 2015. He found his niche here. About six months after moving, he opened El Paso License to Carry, where the 30-year firearm operator teaches state-certified handgun license classes.

The retired photographer says that relocating to a budget-friendly spot allowed him to quit work a few years earlier than planned. He also discovered that El Paso was a safe city with a low crime rate.

"The cost of living, specifically housing, makes it the most affordable small big town in Texas," he says. "In El Paso, I could buy a new home and it's cheaper."

Population: 683,080 in El Paso and 840,410 in El Paso County ►



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Climate:

January: High 58° / Low 33°

July: High 95° / Low 71°

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The average sales price of homes in El Paso was \$165,131 in the first quarter, according to the Greater El Paso Association of Realtors.

Information: Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, ElPaso.org. Destination El Paso, Visit ElPaso.com.

Little Rock, Arkansas

Family drew Brad and Kathy Workman in 2013 from the Philadelphia area to Little Rock, the Arkansas capital in the central part of the state. "I lived in suburbia all my life until we moved here," says Brad, 63, who had a career

in computer-aided design.

They moved downtown to a lifestyle that they love, but does have some trade-offs. He likes not having to maintain a yard or trim trees, but that means he only has a balcony. However, from that balcony, the couple can see the beauty of the Arkansas River. "At this point in my life, it's ideal," Brad says.

He and Kathy, also 63, a former elementary school teacher, take advantage of nearby restaurants; Verizon Arena; Robinson Center, a music hall; and the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum.

Julius Breckling Riverfront Park offers a number of concerts and festivals, including the annual RiverFest, the area's premier outdoor music festival.

The River Market district downtown gives the

couple easy access to arts and entertainment activities, and serves as a gateway for hikers and bikers to the Arkansas River Trail. The Clinton Presidential Park Bridge and the Big Dam Bridge are highlights of this 88-mile trail system.

Golfers also find a haven northwest of the city in Roland at The Alotian Club.

"What's unique about Little Rock is we have the river and atmosphere of a Southern city," Brad says. "There are always activities going on here — always something happening."

Population: 198,541 in Little Rock and 393,956 in Pulaski County

Climate:

January: High 51° / Low 31°

July: High 93° / Low 73°

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The median sales price of single-family homes in Pulaski County was \$160,000 from January through February, according to the Cooperative Arkansas Realtors Multiple Listings Services Inc.

Information: Little Rock Regional Chamber, LittleRockChamber.com. Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau, LittleRock.com.

Madison, Wisconsin

The influence of some 44,000 University of Wisconsin students makes Madison "a young, enthusiastic and energetic city that is growing by leaps and bounds," says Jason Ilstrup, president of Downtown Madison Inc.

That excitement has drawn many young retirees, empty nesters and others downtown. The housing market has responded with new apartments, condos and townhomes. Madison's downtown is vibrant, with the Wisconsin Film Festival each April and the Arts Fair on the Square each July.

The Wisconsin capital city, which sits in the south-central part of the state, is surrounded by agriculture. The Dane County Farmers Market draws fresh produce seekers to Capital Square Saturdays and Wednesdays from April to November. The organization holds two indoor markets in winter.

Entertainers of all styles and genres place Madison's Majestic Theatre on their national tour schedules, and community productions are staged at the Bartell Theatre. Sports fans cheer on the Badgers at University of Wisconsin athletic events.

Other downtown attractions include the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Overture Center for the Arts, by architect

Cesar Pelli.

The 9,800-acre Lake Mendota has a healthy supply of bass, walleye, Northern pike and more. Lake Wingra welcomes boaters, too.

Population: 252,551 in Madison and 536,416 in Dane County

Climate:

January: High 28° / Low 10°

July: High 83° / Low 60°

Cost of living: Above average

Housing cost: The median sales price of homes in Madison was \$273,000 in the first quarter, according to the South Central Wisconsin MLS.

Information: Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, GreaterMadisonChamber.com. Greater Madison Convention and Visitors Bureau, VisitMadison.com.

Richmond, Virginia

Increasingly, empty nesters require walkability in their quest to downsize, and many are finding that in downtown Richmond, says Sarah Jarvis, principal broker with One South Realty Group.

"They like to travel," she says. "So, they are choosing a condo-type setup where they feel comfortable that if something happened while

they were out of town, there would be people around to make sure it's taken care of."

Richmond, the state capital, is 110 miles south of Washington, DC. Watching over downtown and the James River, multistoried buildings such as 7 West and Vistas on the James offer townhomes and condos with great views. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture and the Visual Arts Center of Richmond are among the attractions.

The Altria Theater features Broadway shows and The National theater hosts a variety of concerts. Richmond has become a destination for foodies as well, Jarvis says. Cheezilla's Gourmet Grilled Cheese, a popular food truck, takes the classic sandwich up a notch.

Population: 223,170 in Richmond and 327,898 in Henrico County



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Climate:

January: High 47° / Low 28°

July: High 90° / Low 69°

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The average sales price in the Richmond metro area was \$279,534 for single-family homes and \$249,251 for townhouses and ►

condos from January through February, according to the Richmond Association of Realtors.

Information: ChamberRVA, ChamberRVA.com. Richmond Region Tourism, VisitRichmondVA.com.

St. Petersburg, Florida

Downtown in this Florida Gulf Coast city has an attractive blend of museums, restaurants, bars, theaters, shops and art galleries, says Chris Steinocher, president and CEO of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce.

A trolley system connects several downtown districts. The Dali Museum, the Morean Arts Center and The James Museum of Western and Wildlife Art provide inspiration and enlarge perspectives. At the Second Saturday ArtWalk, more than 40 art galleries and studios open their doors. Lovers of plays, music and sports find multiple attractions in or near downtown, including The Mahaffey Theater at the Duke Energy Center for the Arts, which books masterworks concerts and hosts arts education classes. Shops, craft breweries and restaurants, such as 400 Beach Seafood and Tap House, fill in many of the spaces in between.

"People can bike their way, walk their way, eat their way or drink their way from one thing to the next," Steinocher says.

St. Petersburg and the surrounding area offer golfers plentiful options year-round. Vinoy Golf Club players find egrets, roseate spoonbills and songbirds along the way.

Jim and Pegi Fitton, both 60, moved to St. Petersburg from Key West in 2016, three years after Jim retired from the U.S. Coast Guard and Pegi left her teaching career. Like others, they are drawn outdoors by waterfront parks as well



as festivals and art shows.

"We like the kind of funky stuff," he says.

"We enjoy the sidewalk restaurants, bars and breweries downtown. It's never boring and never too expensive."

Population: 260,999 in St. Petersburg and 970,637 in Pinellas County

Climate:

January: High 69° / Low 54°

July: High 91° / Low 77°

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The median sales price of homes in St. Petersburg was \$198,200 in the first quarter, according to the Pinellas Realtor Organization.

Information: St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce, StPete.com. Visit St. Pete/Clearwater, VisitStPeteClearwater.com.

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Sarasota, Florida

David and Ester Pilston relocated to Sarasota in 2003, but once David arrived, he didn't stay retired. After a career in California's Silicon Valley, David, 59, was tempted by hundreds of volunteer opportunities and soon was helping the Save Our Seabirds rescue and rehabilitation organization. He now serves as CEO. Meanwhile, Ester, 47, enjoys working at a local boutique.

Philanthropy is a big deal here, David says. Numerous nonprofit organizations compete for volunteers. That helpful spirit bleeds into the culture, giving "a strong heart to the city," he says.

The beaches draw people to Sarasota, and the vibrant downtown provides plenty of reasons to stay. "It has all the culture — the orchestra, opera, ballet," David says. "People are very humble about their backgrounds, but you find you are surrounded by incredible people."

The nonprofit Sarasota Institute of Lifetime Learning sponsors expert lectures on a host of topics, which sell out regularly. Ringling College of Art and Design and the State College of Florida offer plentiful learning opportunities for retirees.

Plus, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the Asolo Repertory Theatre, the Florida Studio Theatre and the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall provide inspirational cultural experiences.

Population: 56,610 in Sarasota and 419,119 in Sarasota County

Climate:

January: High 71° / Low 52°

July: High 91° / Low 75°



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Cost of living: Above average

Housing cost: The average sales price in Sarasota County was \$382,619 for single-family homes and \$452,379 for townhouses and condos from January through February, according to Florida Realtors.

Information: The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce, SarasotaChamber.com. Visit Sarasota County, VisitSarasota.com.

Tempe, Arizona

In Tempe, 10 miles east of Phoenix, Arizona State University is a major element of the city vibe. ASU broke ground in February on Mirabella at ASU, an on-site, 20-story housing facility for older adults.

Mary and David Patino, from Los Gatos, CA, chose the Phoenix area in 2004 as their last career stop. She and David, 73, a former executive in the ophthalmology industry, were among the first to purchase a condo in the building, scheduled to open in 2020.

"Here we have a nice, environmentally-friendly building next to an exciting town center," says Mary, 77, a retired educator. "Everything is all in one place. We're on campus. We're part of the college community. That's the

exciting part of it."

They see the Mirabella development as an opportunity for "intergenerational conversation," Mary says. "We want to see the world when we walk out the door. That energy revitalizes us."

Tempe offers much to do downtown, such as visiting the Arizona Artisans Collective Grotto Gallery or enjoying concerts at the Marquee Theatre.

The Patinos also have easy access to the light rail to Phoenix, where they attend the symphony, ballet and more.

Population: 182,498 in Tempe and 4,307,033 in Maricopa County

Climate:

January: High 69° / Low 39°

July: High 105° / Low 75°

Cost of living: Above average

Housing cost: The median sales price in Tempe

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was \$310,000 for single-family homes and \$210,000 for townhouses and condos in the first quarter, according to The Cromford Report.

Information: Tempe Chamber of Commerce, TempeChamber.org. Tempe Tourism Office, TempeTourism.com. **W**

Matthew Zabel is a writer in Burlington, WA.