

## Joliet blossoming into the place to be

### Chicagoland Speedway isn't the only reason people are flocking to this Will County city, which just passed Naperville as the state's 4th largest

By Emma Graves Fitzsimmons | Chicago Tribune reporter  
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Leslie Bolin, who works in a Joliet museum but grew up in Chicago, says people don't believe her when she tries to tell them how cool the Will County town has become over the past decade.

When she returned to school recently and took a speech class, she even decided to give her persuasive talk on why people should visit Joliet.



Jeremy Robinson (right, pointing), 37, of Wheatfield, Ind., walks with family members around the Chicagoland Speedway.

"I was pleasantly surprised when I came here," the 46-year-old said. "It truly is a beautiful city."

One of the best kept secrets of the Chicago area is finally getting out. The town officially passed Naperville this week as the state's fourth largest city, while new statistics reveal that Will County saw one of the region's biggest jumps in tourism dollars last year.

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And the city occupies a national stage this weekend as a huge NASCAR race at Chicagoland Speedway is a prime example of the major attractions bringing people and their money to

Joliet, along with two casinos, a historic theater, a baseball team and revitalized downtown.

Local leaders say it was only a matter of time before people came to view the tough old industrial town as a vibrant city—and get this—major cultural center.

"Maybe we are finally getting the credit that Joliet has deserved for a long time; it's there in black and white numbers," said Ben Benson, director of the Joliet Visitors Bureau. "This wasn't built overnight. We worked hard to get here."

A night on the town in Joliet may not carry the glitz of a trip to downtown Chicago, but the community prides itself as a destination where regular folks have fun without paying a fortune. For visitors, it might be a night at the Comfort Inn instead of the Hilton, and a \$5 ticket to a Joliet JackHammer game instead of a \$60 Cubs ticket.

Residents say the city got a bad rap as gritty and dangerous, and they still have to dispel that old image of Joliet. Recent visits from celebrities such as [Johnny Depp](#) to the set of "Public Enemies" and the filming of the popular FOX television show "Prison Break" may help.

"Most people associated us with the prison and factories; it was seen as a rundown, dirty, unsafe town," said Annette Parker, 38, who works at the Rialto Theater and grew up in Joliet. "It feels much safer and cleaner now."

Joliet grew to 144,316 people last year, edging out the affluent western suburb of Naperville, which has 142,479 people, according to census figures released this week. Aurora (170,855) and Rockford (156,596) still come in second and third to Chicago.

Joliet and Elgin were the only two Midwest towns on the list of 25 fastest growing cities in 2007, according to the census. The others are in Sunbelt states such as California, Texas and Florida.

Michael Kazecki and his wife moved to Joliet four years ago after finding an affordable, 100-year-old "fixer-upper." Growing up in nearby communities, the couple heard bad things about Joliet and were apprehensive at first.

"The perception at the time was that it was full of smog and dirt," Kazecki said at a yard sale on his lawn Friday. "Now it's been rejuvenated. It's a nice miniature version of downtown Chicago."

Some residents took delight in blue-collar Joliet trumping white-collar Naperville in the rankings. Kazecki was excited that more people are choosing to live in the humble community he has come to love.

"Sometimes you go to Naperville on the Riverwalk—everybody has a certain air about them—but it's laid back here," he said.

Jeremy Robinson, 37, of Wheatfield, Ind., only comes to Joliet for the racetrack. He has been aware of the city's image problem for a while, and remembers radio DJs rhyming Joliet with toilet to describe the city.

"I go straight to the races, and when it's over we go straight home," he said. "We're fans of NASCAR. When they brought in these races, that brought us."

The state figures released this week showed tourism dollars in Will County grew by 9.4 percent last year to \$585 million. Only Kendall County tourism, to the west, grew at a faster rate, by 11.2 percent to \$34 million.

Local leaders boast that Joliet's major attractions lure residents from nearby communities and even international tourists. This weekend, the city is pulsing with about 200,000 visitors for NASCAR races. Benson said the race filled every hotel in town, and room bookings have increased across the board the past three years.

An increasingly popular destination is the Route 66 welcome center that opened at the Joliet Area Historical Museum last year. Visitors come from as far away as Japan and Denmark to travel the road and learn about American history. An imitation drive-in movie theater plays a video about the route's history in the lobby, and the visitor book includes signatures from 35 states and 40 countries.

"The legend of Route 66 carries a mystique, and it captures something nostalgic," said museum Interim Director Tony Contos. "You get to see America, starting in a big city and winding through towns. You see mountains and deserts—it's a great picture of America."

Along the way, some people discover Joliet and decide to stay. The city continues to draw thousands of new residents a year while many Midwest communities lose people. Joliet grew by 4,349 people last year.

Many factors contribute to the boom, from affordable housing to a vibrant immigrant community, along with good schools and a declining crime rate, officials say.

Amy Collofello, 36, left Joliet after growing up there, but returned to raise her six children. She hates to hear anyone bad mouth her town these days because she has witnessed its makeover.

"As a kid growing up, it didn't seem like it was so great because there wasn't so much to do," she said. "But now, for my kids, there's tons of things."

*Tribune reporter Mary Owen contributed to this report.*

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