By MUKUL VERMA
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After being beat up in the past by national groups that rate cities, Baton Rouge got relief Monday when a Bala Cynwyd, Pa., company gave the city good marks for economic performance over the past three years.

Alphametrics Corp. said Baton Rouge ranked ninth among 75 U.S. metropolitan areas in economic growth during the 36 months ending in June 1993.

Although Baton Rouge generally is rated well, "we have taken our hard licks," said Libby Murphy, assistant vice president of economic development for the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce.

One example of taking it on the chin came in August when Baton Rouge dropped like a glass-jawed boxer in Money magazine's annual ranking of the best cities in which to live, plunging to 214 from 63.

By comparison, the Alphametrics study was good news.

"It is especially gratifying whenever we are acknowledged to be the good place to do business that we know we are," Murphy said.

The chamber uses studies to tout Baton Rouge. Nonetheless, companies look at other factors, such as the location of suppliers, when they choose to do business in a city, she said.

Alphametrics develops models to solve economic problems.

The company's index rating Baton Rouge ninth used job and personal income figures to evaluate employment growth and to track growth rates among higher-paying job sectors.

Charles Renfro, Alphametrics chief economist, said Baton Rouge's economy since 1990 has been fueled by construction jobs from the petrochemical sector, which translated to a good performance on the company's index.

And much like top-ranked Austin, Texas, Baton Rouge was helped by stable employment provided by state and local government, and by universities, he said.

LSU economist Jim Richardson said companies expanding and upgrading their chemical plants spurred petrochemical construction jobs over the past three years.

The Baton Rouge economy, however, also has been helped by growth in the service sector, such as health care, he said.

To sustain area economic growth, international economies, especially in Europe, must prosper and buy from the city's chemical businesses, Renfro said.

Louisiana exports about 25 percent of its chemicals.

New Orleans did not fare as well as Baton Rouge. With no growth in the index, the Crescent City was ranked No. 44 by Alphametrics.

"New Orleans has gone sideways in the past three years," Renfro said. "It's unusual."

Austin was top-ranked, followed by Las Vegas; Salt Lake City; Raleigh, N.C.; San Antonio; El Paso, Texas; Denver; Knoxville, Tenn.; and Atlanta.

Austin was top-ranked because of growing technology jobs and because people believe it is a good city in which to start businesses, Renfro said.

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