La. cities fall on Money list

By JANET McCONNAUGHEY
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NEW ORLEANS — Most of Louisiana's metro areas plummeted in Money magazine's list of the nation's most livable cities. High pollution and large numbers of high-school dropouts are part of the reason, an editor said.

The Houma-Thibodaux area fell the farthest, to No. 220 from No. 31.

Three cities dropped more than 100 places: Lafayette to No. 167 this year from No. 62 last year; Alexandria to 179 from 47, and Lake Charles to 206 from 91.

Baton Rouge fell to 63 from 40 and Monroe to 80 from 33.

New Orleans and Shreveport held their own.

New Orleans went to No. 26 from No. 23, and Shreveport to 196 from 197 — insignificant differences, said Money senior editor Richard Eisenberg.

There are three reasons for the state's general decline in the list, Eisenberg said.

One is that the magazine polls readers each year about what they want in a place to live, and choices change from year to year.

"This year, readers told us it was more important than last year to be near skiing and near colleges," he said. That's snow skiing, not water skiing.

Another was rising unemployment in most of the state. For instance, the unemployment rate went from 6.6 percent to 8.5 percent in the Houma-Thibodaux area and from 6.6 to 8.1 percent in the Lake Charles metro area, Eisenberg noted.

The third reason, he said, Louisiana had very low scores in some ratings that were added to the lists this year. Louisiana had the nation's lowest high-school graduation rate, ranked 47th out of 50 in a new study on states' financial health, and was 44th on water pollution, Eisenberg said.

One reason for Houma-Thibodaux's dramatic fall was a 1.88 percent loss in jobs, Eisenberg said. "That's one of the most important things we look at year to year."

In addition, he said, its unemployment rate was higher than that for most other cities in Louisiana, where the rate averaged 6 or 7 percent.

Housing helped Shreveport stay in place in spite of Louisiana's problems, he said.

"Housing permits went up an enormous number — 45 percent from 1990 to '91. In New Orleans, they were up 8 percent, also a good number," Eisenberg said.

In addition, he said, Shreveport's housing prices went up 3.5 percent. "Any positive number these days in real estate is helpful."

And, he noted, Shreveport didn't start very high on the list.

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