



February 21, 2017

2017's Best State Capitals to Live in

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Often perceived as socially drab lawmaking centers, many state capitals actually are thriving hubs of activity and thus some of the most livable places in America. But not all state capitals are created equal. And though 17 of them are the largest cities in their states, the biggest population doesn't always represent the best quality of life. ...

Living in a state capital offers many perks, but there are tradeoffs as well. For additional insight, we asked a panel of experts to weigh in with their thoughts on the following key questions:

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks to living in a state's capital city?
2. What are the pros and cons of the state's largest city also serving as its state capital?
3. In evaluating the best state capitals to live in, what are the top five indicators?
4. How does exempting government buildings from local property taxes affect the fiscal well-being of capital cities?
5. Are residents of capital cities more likely to be politically engaged, all else equal? ...

Abraham Unger

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What are the benefits and drawbacks to living in a state's capital city?

The primary benefit of living in a state's capital city is that a state capital is always undergoing economic development, such as the construction of new government buildings. That kind of ongoing development often brings with it agglomeration of other support service industries such as hospitality and professional services (law, accounting, etc.).

The detrimental aspect is that that very same economic development is often very difficult -- downtowns are often created with great hope and construction that never quite meets expectations. Jane Jacobs pointed out back in the 1960s that isolated civic structures self-perpetuate their own structural isolation. These are not organic downtowns that vibrantly grow of their own accord. They typically do not become residential and leisure enclaves.

What are the pros and cons of having the state's largest city also serve as the state capital?

I don't think there is necessarily a one size fits all formula for which city ought to be a state capital. The pro is obviously that the state's largest city is also the state's overall jobs and tourist hub, so that government only provides one more attractive layer to enrich its attraction as a destination. The con is that the state's largest city could become an empty wasteland, housing just government buildings and civil servants by day only, with no larger economic strength. The key is really to be careful in planning for attractions that surround a state capital, such as great restaurants, no matter which size capital city we're talking about.

In evaluating the best state capitals to live in, what are the top five indicators?

I would advise, in order of importance:

1. Crime rate.
2. Employment variation and opportunities outside of government.
3. Rate of growth of current residential development, and of what kind.
4. Whether or not a competitive university is located there.
5. Attractions and hospitality options (restaurants, retail, etc.).

How does exempting government buildings from local property taxes affect the fiscal well-being of capital cities?

It is a detriment, because state capitals are typically saddled not only with expansive tax-exempt structures, but with many tax-exempt non-profit service providers as well, meaning that these cities are losing valuable revenue every day. There has to be reform of this huge loophole. State capital municipalities need those tax dollars just as much as any other municipality, and there is no reason why other municipalities should pick up the public tab -- certainly not for thick public-sector bureaucracies and non-profits contracting out for state agencies.

Are residents of capital cities more likely to be politically engaged, all else equal?

Considering there are so many state elected officials and civil servants in these cities, I think that's a fair assumption to make demographically by sheer virtue of employment demographics. The question is not degree of political engagement, but the more important one of democracy: are these public employees, living in their own enclaves in and around the state capital, aware of and sensitive to the needs and concerns of rank and file state residents? Studies show that bureaucracies have a thick self-interest in their own growth, just as any industry has. But that growth often comes at the expense of public accountability and sensitivity. This is the broader question regarding political elites and the health of American democracy that arose over the recent election cycle.