

How Much Does a Sunset Cost?

Stacy Sacco, 10/22/07, Albuquerque Tribune – Between the Lines

Maybe it's my version of keeping up with the Jones, but I'm always interested in how our state is performing against our 49 other American siblings.

I was recently surprised to find a preliminary report published by the UNM Bureau of Business & Economic Research (www.unm.edu/~bber) showing that our 2006 Per Capita Income (PCI) had increased to \$29,725 which improves our national ranking to the 6th poorest state. That's a big accomplishment since just a few years ago, when I moved back to New Mexico, we ranked 3rd from the bottom.

If we continue this trend, we may soon surpass Utah whose PCI weighs in at \$29,769, or \$44 ahead of us. I've promised several friends that if I win the New Mexico Lottery, I'll give every New Mexican a check for \$45 (and a Form 1099), and I'll be the one person economic engine that moved us up one notch so we can claim the rank of the 7th poorest state!

One must be careful with statistics though since your perspective can cloud your view. Wasn't it Mark Twain who said, "There are lies, damned lies and statistics?" Given a second look, New Mexico doesn't look so bad...

For example, by comparison, if Albuquerque were a state, our PCI would give us a ranking of the 33rd richest state, Sandoval County would be 31st, and Los Alamos County's PCI would be double the highest-ranking state. And if New Mexico were a country, our seemingly paltry PCI of \$29,725 would place New Mexico as the 20th richest nation among the 212 nations worldwide according to World Economic Outlook statistics. Imagine that... the average New Mexican is wealthier than the average person living in China, France, South Korea and Spain to name just a few.

Of course, the most interesting comparison is to Delaware, the richest state with a PCI of \$57,358. However, since Delaware and New Mexico are such different places, I think a few adjustments are necessary.

For example, the daily commute in any New England state such as Delaware can be horrendous. A friend of mine who now calls New Mexico home, tells me his round-trip commute was never less than 2 hours per day. Given that figure and that my round-trip commute is only 30 minutes, let's add the value of the time I've saved to our PCI to make a more equitable comparison. Using our PCI to compute an average hourly wage of approximately \$14.25, the average New Mexican would save about \$5,000 a year given 1-1/2 hours less time each day spent on the road (i.e., 210 work days x 1.5 hours saved/day x \$14.25). That increases our PCI to a commute-adjusted \$34,725.

Better yet, in May 2007, the American Lung Association named Albuquerque "Among the Top Ten Cleanest U.S. Cities for Long-Term Particle Pollution." Our cleaner air does have to add up to some measure of a healthier life and less expensive medical bills right? Even *Men's Fitness Magazine*, earlier this year, named us the "No. 1 Fittest City in America." I say we add in \$6,000 (\$500 per month to account for a typical gym membership, exercise equipment, medical bills, etc.), so our new health-adjusted PCI increases to \$40,725.

In addition, in 2005, Yahoo! HotJobs named Albuquerque a "Rising Star" for providing the foundation for good work and life balance (remember that we also don't have any significant earthquakes,

tornadoes, hurricanes, etc.). Given our less stressful lives, I'll add in another \$15,000 (1,250 per month for counseling, additional healthcare costs, weather damage, etc. that you'd avoid) to our average income which increases our stress-adjusted PCI to \$55,725.

And there are numerous other positive aspects of living in New Mexico that add to its value: the sweet aroma of roasting chili, the friendly attitudes that abound, a neighborhood lined with glowing luminarias on Christmas Eve, a spectacular ride on the Sandia Peak Tram, or hundreds of hot air balloons flying overhead every October and so much more. But the one aspect of living in New Mexico that takes us over the top is our beautiful, wide-eyed skies and sunsets.

So how much does a sunset cost; what's the value of a rainbow-colored evening sky? Given our 360 days of sunshine each year and that our sunsets are better than any movie I've seen at \$10 a seat, let's add in another \$3,600 which brings our average income to a sunset-adjusted CPI of \$59,325.

Eat your heart out Delaware!

No matter how you adjust the numbers, I'm sure you'll agree that living in New Mexico makes us some of the wealthiest people in the world.

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