



Ontario cities get top marks in family friendly city survey

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By Sheila Dabu

For Barrie, Ont.'s Heather Bebb, the city's charm is in its small-town feel and big city services.

"People will still make eye contact and speak to you on the street," said Bebb, executive director of Catholic Family Services in Simcoe County, adding that it's smaller than big cities but large enough to offer activities and events found in many cities, including kid-friendly sports and other recreation.

Bebb, who has two teenaged children, grew up in Newmarket, Ont., but moved to Barrie nine years ago. She said the city, which is in the northern reaches of the Toronto archdiocese, has many attractive qualities, especially for young families.

"I think it's large enough that you don't feel everybody knows your business. It's small enough and pretty close knit," Bebb said.

In a new study on family friendly cities, Barrie topped the list as the most family friendly of all small cities in Canada. Barrie and Guelph, Ont., ranked first and second for the top small cities, while in the medium cities category, Kitchener and Oshawa, Ont., finished in the top two. Calgary was rated the top family friendly city overall.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada released the 15-page study on June 17. It was authored by researchers Rebecca Wallberg and Andrea Mrozek.

"Barrie is a hub for social services," Bebb said, adding that there are services available for children with different needs, access to additional tutoring and many recreational athletic programs.

In the study, cities were given a grade from "A+" to "F," although no city received an overall failing grade.

Calgary received high marks for its range of school choice and provincial funding of school choice as well as low cost of living (a low cost of gas and fairly low food and household prices). It scored well in the community feel category for its green space, bike paths and community centres and its high percentage of residents who donate to charity.

Toronto received an overall grade of B+. It received low marks for the high cost of monthly mortgage payments (an "F") and "Cs" for long commute distances and a high cost of living. But it received high marks for green space, bike paths and community centres, for having a range of

school choice and having a high percentage of seniors living with family.

Ontario cities received mostly “Bs” in the education choice category.

“Ontario provides limited school choice because they fund Catholic schools but no one else,” the report said.

Mrozek said the report isn’t meant to rank cities but to provide a report card for cities in terms of its family friendly qualities.

“A family friendly city will attract more families, who will contribute to the community themselves. Healthy, thriving families help create great cities as much as a city can ever offer a package of goods to attract families,” the report said.

Among the least family friendly cities were Saguenay, Que., and Thunder Bay, Ont. (low population growth), Saint John, N.B. (high unemployment rate and government transfers), and Trois-Rivieres, Que. (low percentage of children living with two married parents).