

Bend becomes active hotbed for technology

BY CHRISTIAN TREJBAL
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BEND — When Chris Reese came to Bend a dozen years ago, the city was just getting over the economic downturn of the 1980s. Back then, a computer programmer working for a video-game company in Bend was unusual, a far cry from the loggers of previous years.

Today, Reese, co-director of Sony Computer Entertainment

America's Bend studio, is one of many high-tech workers making their homes here. The Sony studio alone has about 60 employees, and other technology-oriented companies such as IdaTech, Bend Research and Chemica Technologies to name a few are growing rapidly.

The conventional wisdom is that Bend is a great place to retire, but increasingly it is a great place for young,

technically savvy people to live and work.

Bend officials envision an industrial park and university campus at the north end of town. The so-called Juniper Ridge project could become the cornerstone of an invigorated regional economy based on science, engineering and innovation.

If those companies materialize as planned, they will bring even more skilled

workers to the region, workers like Marshall Simmonds, Morgan O'Neal and Reese.

All three pointed to the character of Bend and outdoor recreation as drawing and keeping them here. That foundation, they said, makes the region ripe for new technology companies that will need to attract talented young workers.

For Simmonds, the best things about Bend are the

lifestyle and the recreational activities.

Simmonds, 33, telecommutes from Bend in his new position as vice president of Enterprise Search Marketing for The New York Times Co.

Simmonds first came to Bend in 1990 from Boise on a scholarship to run for the Central Oregon Community College track team. Two years later, he headed to Portland State University to complete his degree in psychology.

After a stint selling computers in the Willamette Valley, he landed a job with a marketing company as a search-engine optimizer, and that job brought him to Bend. A search-engine optimizer helps companies set up their Web pages so they will appear high on the list of results in Web searches.

In 1999, he went to work for About.com, an online information portal. He stayed in Bend, though, telecommuting and traveling as needed.

The New York Times Co. purchased About.com for \$410 million from Primedia Inc. in February, and now Simmonds works for the media giant.

Technology will allow Simmonds to remain in Bend.

He will continue working with Web developers at About.com, but also with The Times' many other Internet portals, traveling as needed.

"When you come back from New York City," he said, "it's a big collective sigh as you get back to this lifestyle, this pace."

O'Neal, a 2001 Redmond High School graduate, was born and raised in Central Oregon.

For the last two-and-a-half years, the 22-year-old has been working as a software developer at Alpine Internet Solutions, a Web hosting and content management company. There, he has worked on several local Web sites including Brooks Resources, Bend neighborhood associations and the Bend Visitor and Convention Bureau.

O'Neal is a throwback to some of the early entrepreneurs of computing and the Internet. He has little formal training in technology.

"All the knowledge I use at Alpine is self-taught," he said.

Self-taught or not, O'Neal could easily land a job outside of Central Oregon if he wanted. Instead, he chooses to remain here.

"I have been offered jobs in other places for more money," he said. "But there's a lot to do here. Plus it's home. I've got everything that I need."

O'Neal spends a lot of his spare time mountain biking and playing video games. While the biking community gets a lot more attention, he said, both have passionate followings in the region.

"The gaming community here is cool," he said.

"There's a hard-core group in Central Oregon."

O'Neal sees the technology community growing if Bend can keep the cost of living under control.

"You'd probably get more young technology workers if the rent were cheaper," he said. "If it's inexpensive and there's jobs, a lot of people will move here. Bend has so much to offer."

Still, even if the rent seems a little high, O'Neal said it beats the cost of living in other technology centers such as Silicon Valley or San Francisco.

Reese, 35, is the technical director for Sony Computers Entertainment of America's Bend Studio. In the company's offices in the Old Mill District, he oversees programming, design elements and game engines for video games that the studio develops for Sony.

The studio's most recent game, "Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain," came out about a year ago for the PlayStation 2.

Reese came to Bend about 12 years ago.

"I was looking at jobs all over the place at the time," he said. "I'd never stayed in Bend before that, only passed through."

When he and his wife, Josie, first visited Bend, he liked it immediately, though it took his wife a little longer to adjust.

"I like the small-town aspect of it," he said. "Even though we've seen a lot of growth, Bend still has the small-town feel."

He said that Bend's environment helps him attract new talent to the studio.

"Typically I look for people straight out of college for our entry-level positions," he said. "The majority of people who have come here are looking for the community feel that Bend has. Most of our people are really into outdoor activities. It's a good family environment and the cost of living is good. We've brought people from all over."

Trends so far paint a rosy future for the city.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2002 there were 1,705 people working in information industries in Deschutes County. Together, they had \$76 million in personal income.

During the 1990s, young people, age 18 to 34, did not come to Deschutes County as quickly as people of other ages did, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The county's population grew 54 percent, but 18- to 34-year-olds only grew 40 percent.

That has changed in the new century.

From 2000 to 2003, the younger population grew slightly faster than the population as a whole, 15 percent to 13 percent. Eighteen to 34 year olds now account for about one-fifth of all people living here.

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