



PHOTO BY JOHN FOSTER

# Pikeville: Mayberry, with muscle

After living several years in Louisville, Lexington and other areas in central Kentucky, **Donovan Blackburn** yearned to return to Pikeville—and not simply because he'd be going back to his roots as a native eastern Kentuckian.

“The other thing that was pulling me was the idea to live in a Mayberry-type setting,” he said. “So I bought a home downtown that is about 120 years old and right by the city park. Now, every evening I go for a walk through downtown and see families and friends and people I’ve either known or grown up with. And you sit down on a bench and talk with them, and you feel safe. You feel good about this town.”

Blackburn, who has been Pikeville’s city manager for a little over a year, would be the first to agree that while the town has a laid-back friendliness to it, there’s no denying that this Mayberry also packs plenty of muscle—and enjoys flexing it.

Consider two major renovation projects nearing completion that are transforming downtown.

One involves removing all overhead power, cable TV and phone lines and relocating them underneath the city in conduit pipes—which not only eases safety concerns over aging power lines that were falling down, but also has significant aesthetic value. In such a mountainous city as Pikeville, removing all the transformers, wires and poles will reduce clutter and contribute to a more open feel.

The second involves a downtown street renovation that is part of the city’s Main Street Renaissance program. The beautification project includes brick crosswalks at each intersection, new cast iron decorative light posts, wrought iron benches and fencing, and more than 100 stone planters for small trees.

**Missy Staggs**, director of the Main Street program, said the city’s efforts are causing downtown businesses to take a proactive approach.

“We had one lawyer who liked the benches the city was putting in so much that he bought two to put in front of his own building,” she said.

A new 7,000-seat arena/convention

center is scheduled for completion in a few months, and a 700-car brick-and-glass parking structure that looks more like a retail building than a garage will lead to a short walk through the park to the new arena.

It didn’t hurt, of course, that former Gov. **Paul Patton**, a resident of Pikeville, helped get the city funding for much of its improvements—funding that has

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6. Don’t merely grow; plan and develop over time
7. Build beautifully and steward the environment
8. Cultivate leadership and citizen involvement
9. Recruit, retain and generate wealth
10. Mimic bigness, but think small
11. Rethink boundaries
12. Buy locally, sell globally



Pikeville College sits atop a hill overlooking the city of Pikeville.

come from city, state and federal agencies. Still, what separates Pikeville from other cities is its visionary approach, which will increase its role as a magnet for an entire region, including more than 70,000 people in Pike County alone.

“We’re close to sealing a deal for a four-star hotel in downtown,” Blackburn said.

The town’s public transit system will operate out of the new parking structure, and a downtown trolley has been

added. Little stations are being put up all over town for trolley stops.

“You don’t usually see it in smaller towns like ours, but our goal is to make our downtown a vibrant, 24/7 place to be,” Staggs said.

If Pikeville is a place that encourages visionaries, Staggs says that much of the credit goes to the late William C. Hambley, who as mayor pushed for the “Pikeville Cut-Thru”, a massive mountainside earth removal project that increased the city’s flatland to allow for expansion. A statue of the mayor is planned for the downtown park.

“He was an amazing man, a brilliant, brilliant man,” Staggs said. “His statue will be right in the middle of everything, which is where it belongs. He started all of this, and we’ve just had wonderful leadership since that has taken it and gone ahead with his dreams.”

Those dreams, Staggs suggests, have encouraged others.

“Now we’re starting to have some of our own dreams,” she said. “We’ve got a great group of intelligent people who are willing to come together and work and see the beauty and value of what we have here. And that’s very rare. I think we’re blessed.”

—NEWCITIES FOUNDATION STAFF



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# Pikeville at a Glance

**Mayor:** Frank Justice II

**Population:** 6,295

**Location:** Even though Pike County is tucked away in the easternmost part of Kentucky, it is impossible for the county and the city of Pikeville to be overlooked. It has a population of roughly 70,000, and it is by far Kentucky's largest county at 786 square miles—while Pikeville, the county seat, is a hub of activity for the entire mountain region. The town is nestled among the lush forests of the towering Cumberland Mountains, near the Big Sandy River. Pikeville, dubbed “Kentucky’s Mountain Treasure,” is located in the heart of Appalachia near the three-state corner that includes Virginia and West Virginia.

**History:** Originally part of Madison County, Pike County was created by an act of the legislature in 1821, and it covered a vast stretch of land—everything between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, which included the then-small town of Chicago. In 1825 Pike County was reduced to its present size. The first settlers were New Englanders, prominent among them Col. **William Ross**, who made significant contributions to prosperity in the region. Pikeville was named after explorer **Zebulon M. Pike**.

Twice selected as one of the 100 best small towns in America by author **Norm Crampton**, Pikeville has far more big-city amenities than its size would seemingly dictate. With more than 100 attorneys, 30 CPAs and 900 businesses, Pikeville is not only a retail, financial and industrial center, it also serves as the region's legal and judicial headquarters. Federal, district and circuit courts are held in Pikeville.

A big reason why Pikeville and Pike County play such a prominent role is the result of the county being one of the world's biggest producers of bituminous coal (more than 35 million tons mined each year). The county is Kentucky's third-largest banking center. Pikeville, meanwhile, has financial institutions and holding companies with more than \$1 billion in assets.

Pikeville also figures in a number of historical events, including a legendary feud site between the **Hatfields** and the **McCoys** that is listed on the National Historic Register. Both families have cemetery plots in the town.

Pikeville also likes to be known as “The City That Moves Mountains.” While the locals might mean it figuratively, they could also mean it literally. This was a town that was outgrowing its surroundings and also was plagued by frequent flooding since it was tightly wedged in by the mountains in close proximity to the river. The solution required one of the largest earth-moving and engineering achievements in this hemisphere, second only to the Panama Canal.

The Pikeville Cut-Thru project cut into the surrounding mountains to create a channel 1,300 feet wide, 3,700



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**Special Events and Attractions:** The Pikeville Concert Association presents six performing arts programs annually. The city's Hillbilly Festival, held the third weekend in April each year, is a three-day event that draws more than 100,000 people. Offering music, food and fun, the event also helps raise funds for a children's hospital. Pikeville College, meanwhile, provides year-round events ranging from art exhibits to musical concerts—along with a Christmas arts and crafts bazaar. The new \$29 million Eastern Kentucky Exposition Center, which includes an arena that will seat approximately 7,000, provides a striking brick-and-glass addition to the downtown landscape. It is scheduled to open in late summer or early fall and will greatly increase the city's number of music concerts, sporting events and other attractions and performances.

**Native Sons:** Mayor **William Carter Hambley**, M.D., who was the brain-child behind the Pikeville Cut-Thru; Former Gov. **Paul E. Patton**; **Randolph McCoy**, one of the prominent players in the Hatfield-McCoy feud; and musician/actor **Dwight Yoakam**.

**Web sites for additional information:** [www.pikevillecity.com](http://www.pikevillecity.com), [www.kyhometown.com/pikeville/](http://www.kyhometown.com/pikeville/), [www.pc.edu/](http://www.pc.edu/) (Pikeville College), [www.city-data.com/city/Pikeville-Kentucky.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/Pikeville-Kentucky.html), [www.eastkyexpo.com](http://www.eastkyexpo.com)



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Pikeville is a trail, financial and industrial center as well as judicial and legion headquarters for eastern Kentucky.

feet long and 523 feet deep. The project took 14 years to complete and was dedicated in 1987. *The New York Times* called it “the eighth wonder of the world.”