

8 Great Places

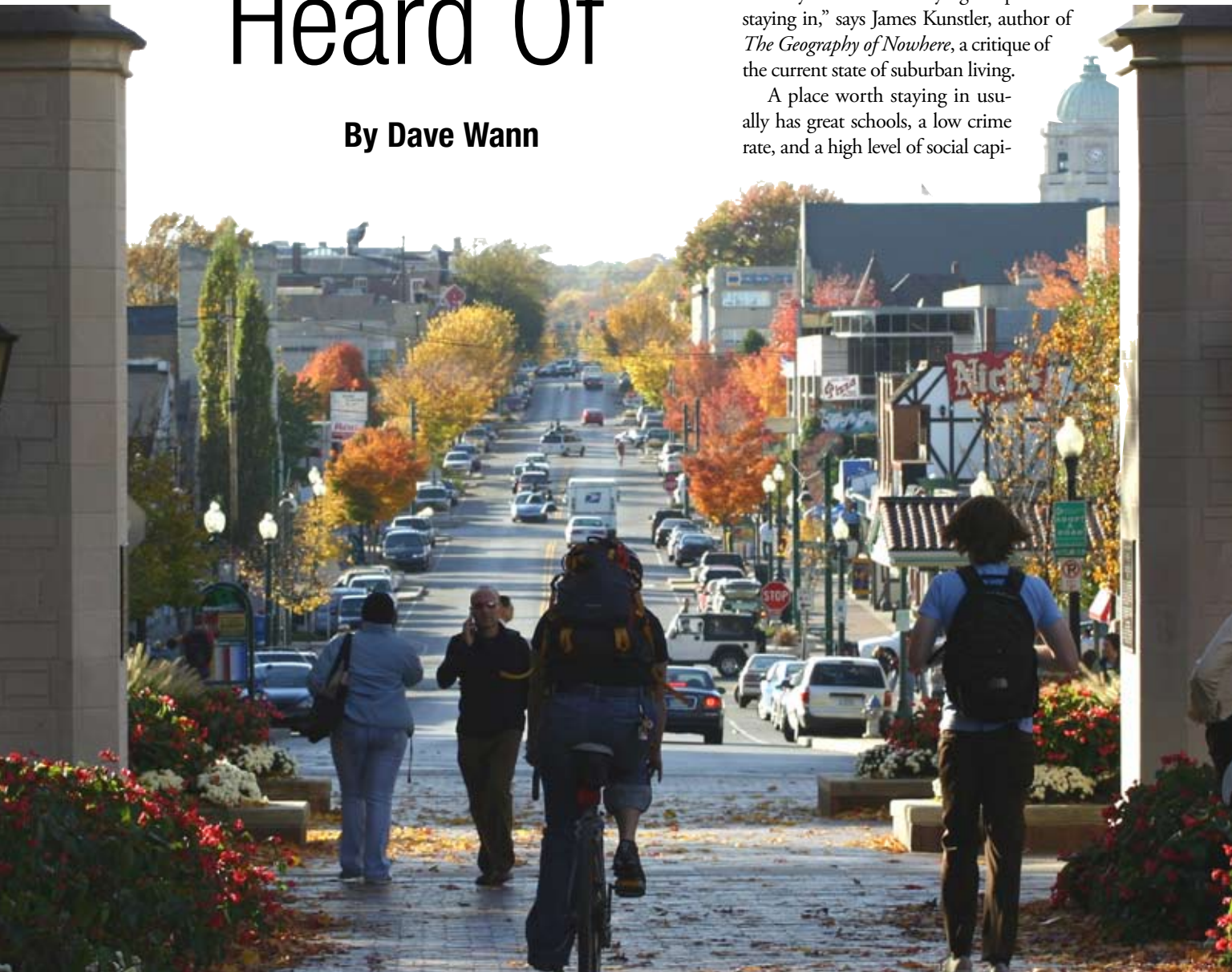
You've Never Heard Of

By Dave Wann

Our second annual list of sustainable communities with a vision for the future.

What makes a town great to live in or visit? Each of the eight places we've chosen to highlight this year are unique, yet they share many of the same qualities. We're not suggesting you quit your job and make a beeline for one of these towns—maybe just learn from them to make your own community more livable and sustainable. “The 20th Century was about going, but the 21st Century will be about staying in a place worth staying in,” says James Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, a critique of the current state of suburban living.

A place worth staying in usually has great schools, a low crime rate, and a high level of social capi-



tal—the networking, trust and participation that cement a community together. It has a good supply of affordable housing for the people who live and work there, such as nurses, firefighters and merchants. There are public spaces where people and cars are kept separate; pedestrian walkways; restaurants that serve delicious, healthy food; and places to listen to music and see local art.

The residents and leaders of a great town or city celebrate the unique characteristics of their place—such as the maple syrup, pastures and covered bridges of Brattleboro, Vt.; the seaside ambience of Bellingham, Wash., where the annual “Ski to Sea” relay race is an annual tradition; or the lush, lake- and river-rich countryside of Eau Claire, Wis.

The goal should be to create a community culture that puts the pieces together, not only identifying what the community needs but how best to meet those needs in resourceful, synergistic ways.

BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

Bloomington residents describe their hometown with words such as “homey,” “affordable” and “politically active.” Developer Matt Press, who went away for college but ultimately returned, says, “This town spoke to me. I can think of few other places that combine culture, nature and community the way Bloomington does.”

You can feel what he’s talking about as you walk through the 100-vendor farmers market, in the shadow of the Monroe County Courthouse that towers over the town square.

There’s civic energy here—an unusually strong sense of pride and participation that asserted itself several decades ago when the downtown area had a lot of vacancies and buildings were in disrepair. City leaders wanted to create a place where their



children would stay and live; a place that would attract sustainable, job-producing businesses. Since then, the city has refurbished or constructed about 200 buildings, breathing new life into the city’s core.

The signature downtown event is the annual Lotus World Music and Arts

Festival, a two-day show that rocks Bloomington every fall. Musicians from all over the world offer more than 80 performances in numerous venues. Plus, one of America’s largest, most respected music schools is at Indiana University, and with performances by local and touring bands, you can find music every day of the year—often for free.

Bikes are another icon of daily life in Bloomington. At the Community Bicycle Project headquarters, “gently used” bikes are donated, rebuilt and resold ready for the road. Volunteers “earn a bike” by working for the project, at the same time learning the valuable skills of bicycle repair and maintenance.

And every spring since 1951, the Little 500 has matched 33 qualifying teams

Bloomington, Indiana

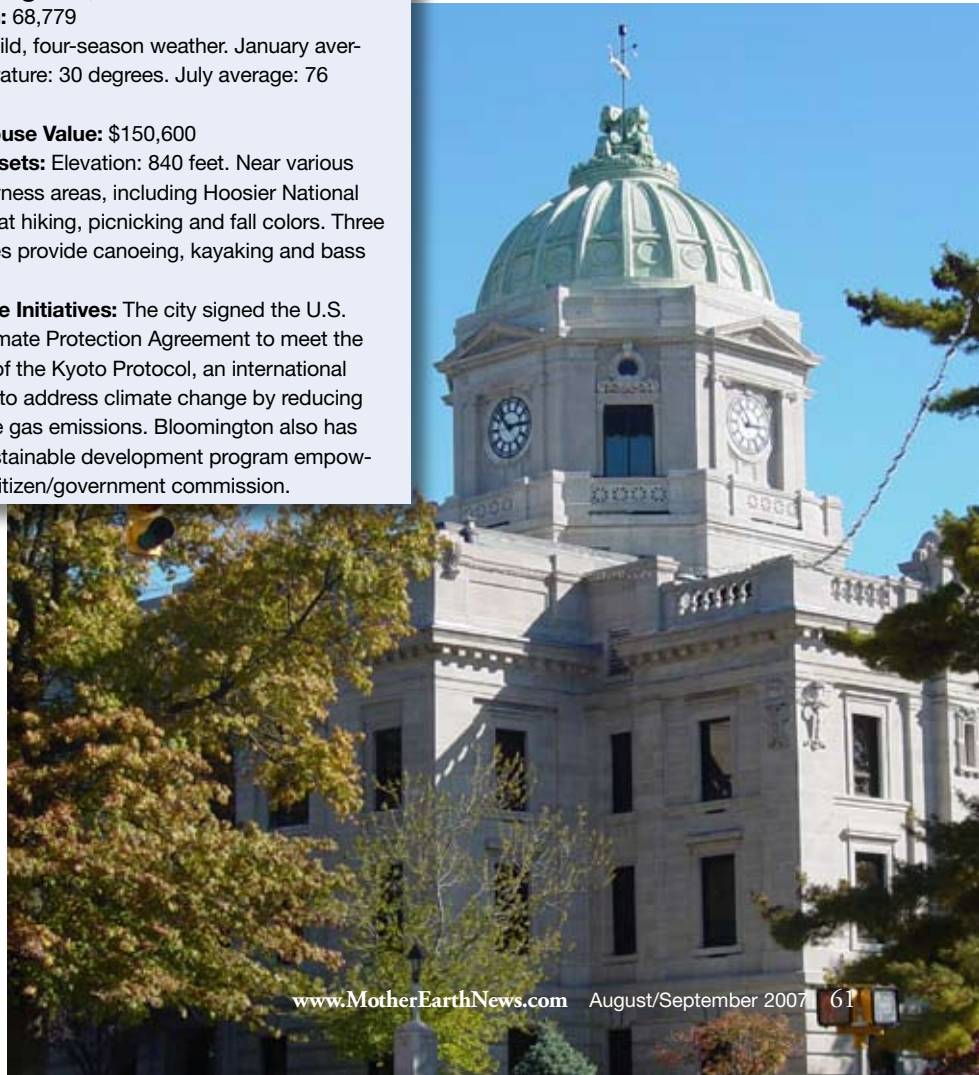
Population: 68,779

Climate: Mild, four-season weather. January average temperature: 30 degrees. July average: 76 degrees.

Median House Value: \$150,600

Natural Assets: Elevation: 840 feet. Near various large wilderness areas, including Hoosier National Forest. Great hiking, picnicking and fall colors. Three nearby lakes provide canoeing, kayaking and bass fishing.

Sustainable Initiatives: The city signed the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement to meet the standards of the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement to address climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Bloomington also has a major sustainable development program empowered by a citizen/government commission.





Bellingham, Washington

Population: 72,992

Climate: Mild weather with a long rainy season. January average temperature: 35 degrees. July average: 62 degrees.

Median House Value: \$252,000

Natural Assets: Access to Bellingham Bay, San Juan Islands and Mount Baker as well as the 241-acre Whatcom Falls Park that features four waterfalls and well-maintained walking trails. During the summer, Whirlpool Falls is a popular swimming hole where locals jump off cliffs as high as 50 feet into the natural pool below.

Sustainable Initiatives: Strong municipal and county commitment to resource efficiency and stewardship. Bellingham has signed the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, and administers the Voluntary Metering Program that promotes residential and commercial water conservation.



against each other in a 200 lap (about 50 mile) bicycle race. Bicycling legend Lance Armstrong calls it “the coolest event he’s ever attended.” Since the first Little 500 race, more than \$1 million has been raised to support scholarships for working students.

Repeatedly awarded the “Tree City USA” distinction for meeting forestry stewardship standards determined by The National Arbor Day Foundation, Bloomington is also known for creating wildlife habitat in naturalized back yards and parks. More than 200 homes are certified by the National Wildlife Federation as wildlife habitat—a form of diverse landscaping that includes native plants and provides food, shelter and habitat to animals.

“I’ve seen 18 different species of birds in my yard, including brightly colored migratory birds such as the scarlet tanager,” says Lucille Bertuccio, director of the Center for Sustainable Living (www.simplysl.org), a nonprofit organization formed by

Bloomington residents in 1992 to create services, projects and networking opportunities for ecologically sustainable lifestyles.

BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

Some locals insist that snowboarding was invented and perfected on the slopes of Mount Baker, a 10,800-foot glacier-covered mountain clearly visible from the streets of Bellingham. Others have little interest in snowboarding but love to sail, kayak, watch Orca whales, see great art, go to the farmers market or see concerts at Mount Baker Theater. Bellingham, just south of the Canadian border and 90 miles north of Seattle, supplies all these possibilities.

“A lot of people move here, then figure out how they’ll make a living,” says Michelle Long, executive director of Sustainable Connections (www.sustainableconnections.org), a nonprofit organization based in Bellingham whose mission is to promote

the economic benefits of choosing local, independently owned businesses.

What makes Bellingham a great place is the deliberate effort to include sustainability and quality of life as part of every community discussion. With community enrichment as the overall goal, groups such as the Whatcom Coalition for Healthy Communities identified a “dashboard of indicators” for tracking the community’s health in terms of crime rate, civic involvement and infant mortality. Recognizing the need for a new generation of farmers to provide locally grown food, Sustainable Connection’s “Food to Bank On” program has offered apprenticeships to 23 new or-

ganic farmers in the past three years.

Bellingham and all of Whatcom County have created a local culture with a bright new ethic. Sustainability has become a way of life. Even in an environmentally active state, Whatcom was the first county to offer curbside recycling. According to www.18seconds.org, a Web site pooling the data of CFL retailers, Bellingham ranks 11th nationally in per capita purchasing of compact fluorescent bulbs. The City of Bellingham has opted to purchase 100 percent green power from renewable energy sources such as solar and wind for city government operations, and Western Washington University students agreed to raise tuition slightly to fund a campus powered by 100 percent renewable energy.

UKIAH, CALIFORNIA

Endowed with ecological wealth in the form of a mild climate, fertile soil, and surrounding forests of oak and some remaining redwood, Ukiah and Mendocino County are a mecca for all things sustainable. Ukiah is the home of the first certified organic brewpub, Ukiah Brewing Co., and the area also boasts more than 20 organic wineries, including Frey and Fetzer. Mendocino was the first county in the United States to host a community supported agriculture farm, and the first county to ban the use of ge-

netically modified organisms in agriculture. John Schaeffer, founder of Gaiam Real Goods (www.realgoods.com), a major vendor of renewable energy technology, sold the first retail solar photovoltaic panel from the Real Goods store near Ukiah.

The county also is active in the re-localization movement. The mission statement for GULP (Greater Ukiah Localization Project) is “to engage all residents of the Upper Russian River Watershed to ensure local sources of food, water, energy, and the basic physical and spiritual needs of our communities by co-creating vibrant, self-

Ukiah, California

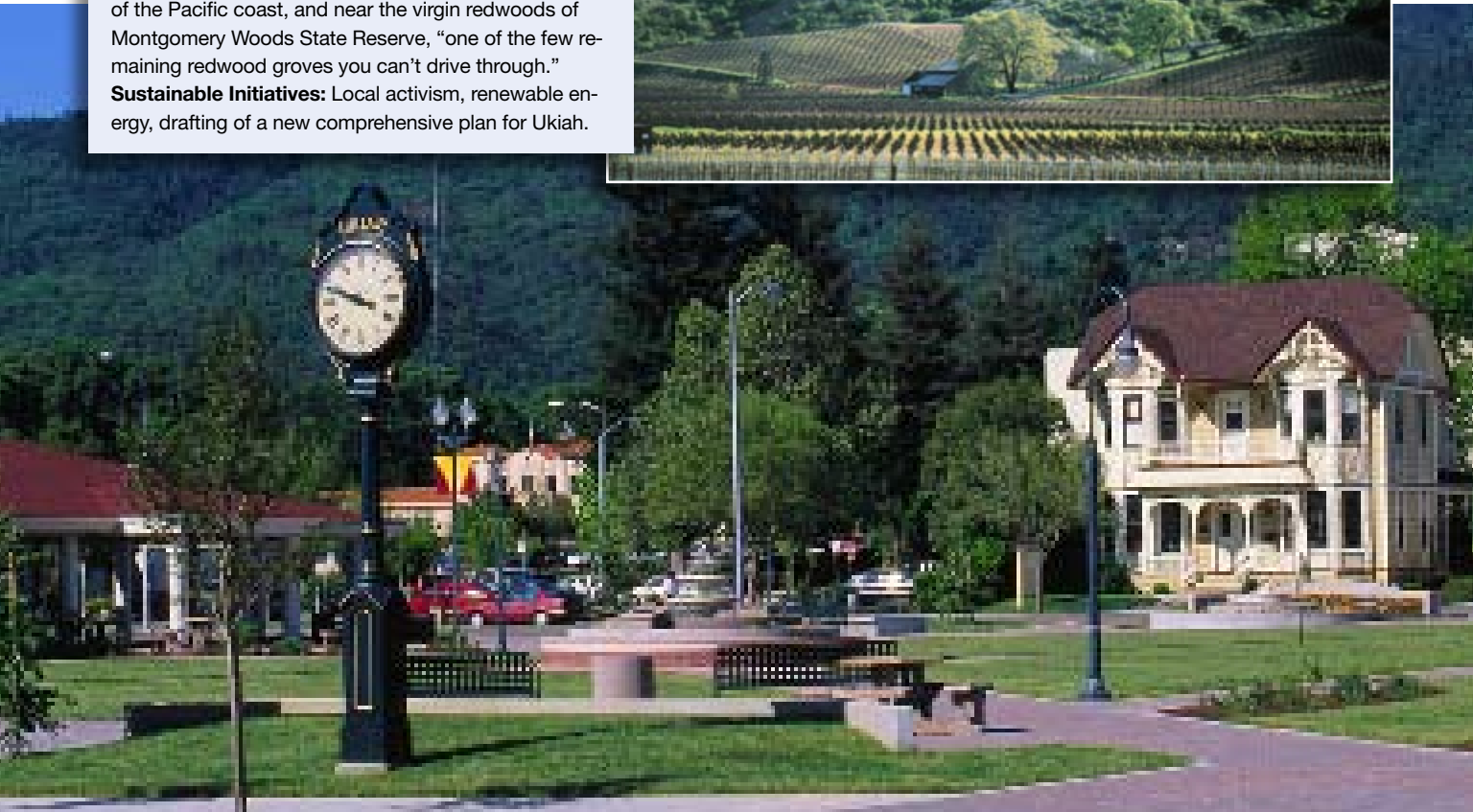
Population: 15,580

Climate: Mild in general; warm summer afternoons buffered by coastal breezes. January average temperature: 45 degrees. July average: 73 degrees.

Median House Value: \$330,000

Natural Assets: Elevation: 615 feet. Within 45 minutes of the Pacific coast, and near the virgin redwoods of Montgomery Woods State Reserve, “one of the few remaining redwood groves you can’t drive through.”

Sustainable Initiatives: Local activism, renewable energy, drafting of a new comprehensive plan for Ukiah.





Eau Claire, Wisconsin

Population: 62,570

Climate: Chilly winters and warm, potentially humid summers. January average temperature: 14 degrees. July average: 72 degrees.

Median House Value: \$139,900

Natural Assets: Chippewa River State Trail, a spectacular 30-mile riverside trail from Eau Claire to the city of Durland. Access to Wisconsin's 15,000 lakes and 33,000 miles of rivers and streams.

Sustainable Initiatives: Extensive use of bicycles and bicycling infrastructure. Methane generator at a local dairy operation and increasing use of solar energy.



reliant, local economies.”

Ukiah's community culture is about being local, not just buying local. Dave Smith, owner of Mulligan books and retired partner of Smith and Hawken, is a cultural and political fixture in Ukiah. To stimulate more rooftop solar energy installations, Smith circulated a petition titled “Lets Solarize Our Village.” Many locals already have installed solar, and with attractive state and utility rebates and federal tax credits, Smith thinks many more

WISCONSIN

This west central Wisconsin city is not a huge tourist destination, and that's OK with most of its residents. What they like about Eau Claire is its leisurely pace of life, the safety of its streets, and the fact that it was recently named one of the 100 best places to raise kids by America's Promise Alliance (www.americaspromise.org), an organization that works to ensure the well-being of children and youth. Eau Claire resident Zeus Stark says, “Living here is

kind of like you went back in time 20 years. People take the time to look you in the eye when they talk to you.”

City leaders took the time to ask citizens, “What do we have here that's worth protecting and enhancing? What does Eau Claire need in order to be a better place?” In brainstorming sessions called “The Idea Lounge,” participants identified the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers as one of the city's finest assets—a valuable link to the area's heritage—even though its industrial years (sawmills, coal tar plant, battery factory, etc.) had left deep scars. Residents and officials agreed that downtown Eau Claire needed a grocery store and a park in which people can gather. A new strategic vision was born.

It didn't happen overnight, but a decade after the vision first came together, it's a reality. Now residents from six surrounding neighborhoods ride bikes and walk to the redeveloped Phoenix Park. Every Thursday from June through September, the concert series “Sounds of Summer” draws crowds to the park, and the new farmers market is a huge success. It draws up to 5,000

community members every Saturday and Tuesday to support local growers and weave a community culture.

PAONIA, COLORADO

This little western slope gem was first established as a home base for coal miners, many of whom still occupy the bungalow houses of the downtown area. There also are many artists and musicians, merchants and new age post-hippies living in and around town. It's a wonderful little place without traffic lights, where most people drive as if they were in their '90s—no one seems to be in a hurry. The countryside surrounding Paonia includes many world-class apple, peach and cherry orchards, a few organic vegetable farms and vineyards, and the ranches of families that have been in the cattle business for generations.

Environmentalist Allison Elliot says,



Paonia, Colorado

Population: 1,589

Climate: January average temperature: 25 degrees. July average: 72 degrees.

Median House Value: \$124,300

Natural Assets: Great rafting, fishing and camping at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and West Elk Wilderness Area; bicycling on beautiful country roads.

Sustainable Initiatives: Citizen activism (such as Western Slope Environmental Resource Council) to protect Paonia from over development; and create local self-reliance and cooperation.



“We’re a diverse population, but we have a common goal: to make Paonia a great place.” The Blue Sage Center for the Arts has a similar goal. This nonprofit, community-run facility is housed in two classic buildings on Grand Avenue, the main drag through town. Whether you’re looking for a place to take yoga classes, have a wedding, or see a concert or art exhibition, the Blue Sage is it. On a typical night, local musician Mike Gwinn and the North Fork Flyers might be on stage, or local children performing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Life in Paonia is a blend of the old and new. An example of the old is the Bross Hotel, a painstakingly restored 1906 hotel furnished with antiques and handmade quilts—a great place to stay if you want to feel the slow, steady pulse of Paonia. Examples of the new are several green busi-

nesses that have chosen Paonia as home: Solar Energy International, which offers hands-on classes in photovoltaic technology, and Chaco Sandals, an employer of about 150 jobs. According to marketing director Brian Scranton, Chaco pays its employees to bike to work and volunteer in the community.

OCEAN SPRINGS, MISSISSIPPI

If you’ve survived a hurricane with the fury of Katrina, the word sustainability is partly synonymous with survivability. The downtown area of Ocean Springs was one of the few commercial districts on the Mississippi coast to come through Katrina intact, or nearly so—but 177 houses in the small city did not. Mary Alice and John Miner had lived in Ocean Springs for 32 years when Katrina blew their house right off Lover’s Lane. Now they’ve rebuilt a smaller house out of steel studs and walls. At age 82, the couple (owners of a toy store that survived) once again has a mortgage, but it was out of the question to move away

from their cherished hometown.

Because of debris that’s still being cleared away, local officials have implemented a hefty \$300 fine for littering. They’ve already replaced more than 5,000 trees and have plans to restore protective wetlands. All new public buildings will meet LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) green building standards.

“We learned to be grateful for what we have here,” says mayor Connie Moran. What they have is a historic town settled by the French in 1699, with a colorful mix of mansions overlooking the sea, fantastic gardens and ivy-covered cottages shaded by live oaks—the southern symbol of strength.

Ocean Springs also has both natural and cultural assets. Tourists come here to eat fresh seafood; go sailboating, fishing and birding in the bayou and bay; or visit the barrier islands that are preserved as a National Seashore. Many also come to see the art of Walter Anderson, a painter who expressed the nature of Ocean Springs in



Dixon, New Mexico

Population: 1,529

Climate: Mild in summer, erratic in winter. Average January temperature: 31 degrees. July average: 72 degrees.

Median House Value: \$220,000

Natural Assets: Confluence of Embudo River and Rio Grande; pastoral countryside of rolling hills, characterized by sagebrush, apache plume, cliffrose and piñon pines.

Sustainable Initiatives: Passive solar architecture; local economy; preservation of land, water rights and watershed.

bold, Van Gogh-like strokes. The Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center supplies music, visual, and performing arts displays and education to the community.

DIXON, NEW MEXICO

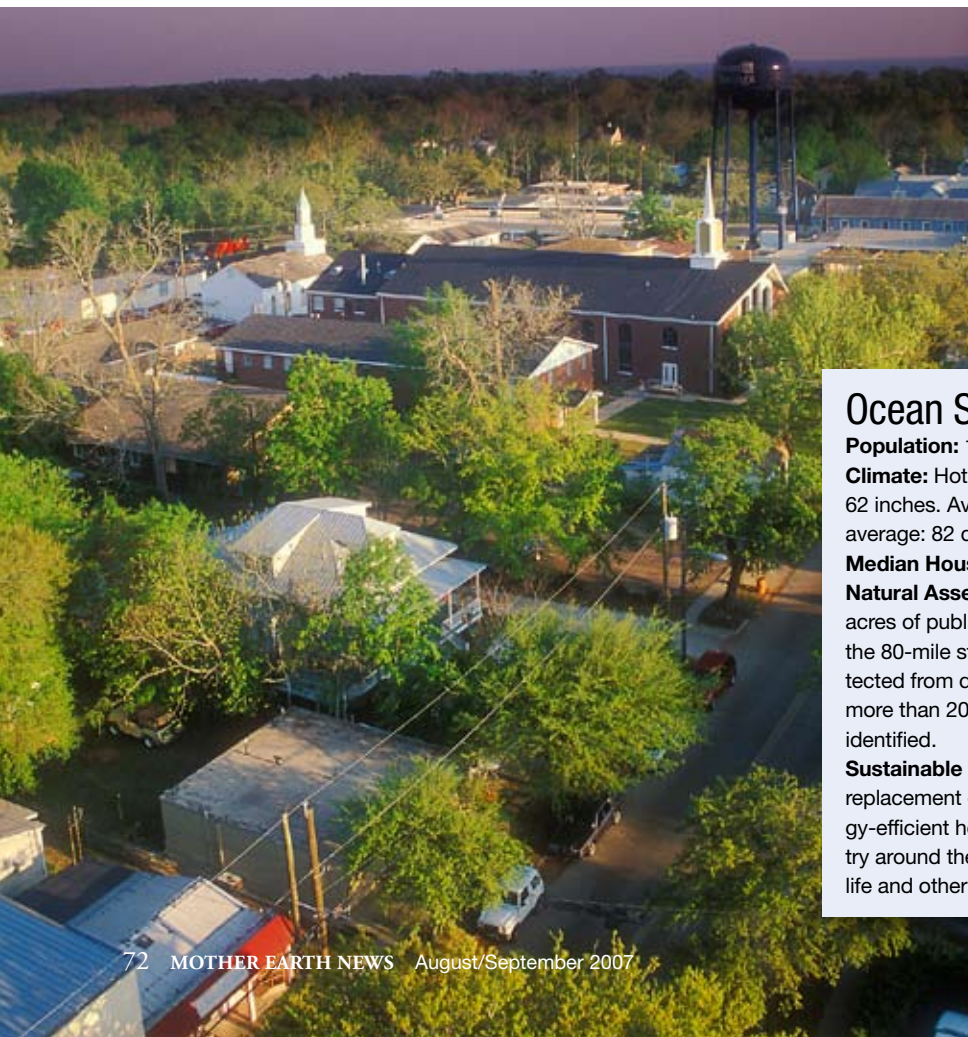
The houses and farms in Dixon (about half an hour from Taos and an hour from Santa Fe) were built fairly close together to make use of meticulously maintained

acequias—irrigation ditches fed by snowmelt. Community governance is organized around protection of the all-important watershed, under the direction of a *mayordomo*, or “ditch boss.”

This village, rich in Hispanic and Native American heritage, blossoms the first weekend in November when the an-

nual Studio Tour begins. Since 1981, this is the time when stone sculptors, vegetable farmers, grapevine-wreath weavers, garlic garland braiders, winemakers, chocolate makers and many other artisans open their homesteads to demonstrate how they practice their crafts and honor their traditions. Fine arts and crafts, tortillas, sopapillas and tamales can be sampled and purchased at many of these home-studios, but the connection with a community culture at its finest hour is beyond the reach of money. “Lights are burning late into the night before the Studio Tour,” says Lynda Prim, owner of a six-acre farm near the town.

They don't call this the “land of en-



Ocean Springs, Mississippi

Population: 17,698

Climate: Hot and muggy summers. Annual precipitation 62 inches. Average January temperature: 68 degrees. July average: 82 degrees.

Median House Value: \$120,500

Natural Assets: Elevation: 30 feet. Access to 170,000 acres of public lands in Jackson and George Counties and the 80-mile stretch of the Pascagoula River that is protected from development. At this year's Wild Wing festival, more than 200 of 342 species of birds in the region were identified.

Sustainable Initiatives: Restoration of natural wetlands; replacement of destroyed houses with smaller, more energy-efficient homes; and creation of an eco-tourism industry around the unspoiled nature of the area: birds, marine life and other wildlife on huge tracts of undeveloped land.

chantment” for nothing. But you don’t have to own a second home to experience Dixon—there are some great cabins and adobe casitas for rent by the week.

BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

Faced with the challenge of preserving their agricultural heritage and their beautiful landscape, the residents of Brattleboro created a local tradition that has captured New England’s heart: “The Strolling of the

Heifers,” a feminine version of Pamplona’s “Running of the Bulls,” according to founder Orly Munzing. Up to 50,000 people attend this three-day June event to celebrate regional agriculture with a parade, music, farm-fresh food, workshops and farm tours. Munzing’s inspiration came as she talked with a neighbor in his orchard. “Pretty soon,” he told her, “there won’t be any picturesque hay bales in Vermont.” But munzing hopes she and her colleagues can help prevent that loss.

People live in or visit Brattleboro because it’s vintage Vermont, complete with covered bridges, walking paths, dairy cows grazing on hillsides and church steeples jutting into the sky. This artsy, intellectual town on the Connecticut River is known for music, art and great food. The Brattleboro Food Co-op, in business since 1975, now has 5,000

members and 16,000 square feet of space. Members can do volunteer work in the community to get discounts at the store. The co-op carries 500 different cheeses, and every month a producer is spotlighted at the store and in the co-op newsletter. According to Jenifer Morier, a manager at the co-op, “Sometimes people have a hard time getting through the store because they keep running into people they know.”



Brattleboro, Vermont

Population: 11,994
Climate: Winters which usually make the holiday season white (average annual snowfall is 68 inches). Average January temperature: 25 degrees. July average: 73 degrees.
Median House Value: \$180,000
Natural Assets: Skiing at Mount Snow, Haystack and Stratton ski areas; kayaking on the Connecticut River; mountain biking and hiking in the Green Mountains.
Sustainable Initiatives: Civic activism to preserve quality of life (for instance, no billboards allowed). Recently, 200 residents took the “Localvore” challenge in which they pledged to eat locally grown foods for either a week or a month.

