



This chart on Monkey Dish shows a Nielsen survey that ranks Liberal as the third best city in the country when it comes to potential for opening an eatery. The survey said even though Liberal has a population of 23,000, the restaurants in Liberal average \$1.2 million in annual sales per eatery. The Retail Growth Index is five times higher than the national average of 100. Courtesy graphic

A Nielsen survey lists Liberal as third in the nation for eatery growth potential

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

A national ranking and survey agency that analyzes restaurants has placed Liberal in the number three spot for "Towns with Potential." The website "Monkey Dish," which provides support and research information to those in the restaurant industry, place Liberal high on its list of places to set up shop. The ranking was based on information gathered by Nielsen, the prestigious company best known for ranking the performance of television programs and viewers' habits.

Monkey Dish said of Liberal, "This market more than doubled restaurant sales from last year. Businesses have many openings, and coupled with a shortage of housing units, visitors and temporary residents eat out more frequently. The success of their local semi-pro Bee Jays, frequent national and state champions, draws more visitors to the area." Liberal scored an RGI (Restaurant Growth Index) number of more than 500, five times that of Dodge City, Wichita, Salina, Manhattan or Lawrence.

According to the Nielsen company, the national average RGI is 100, and "the higher the score over 100, the better the opportunities; scores below 100 indicate poorer opportunities."

While the attention is welcome, Liberal Economic Development Director Jeff Parsons said it is no surprise.

"This goes to support what we've already learned from our consulting firm, Retail Attractions," Parsons said. "There is room for more restaurants in Liberal."

Parsons noted that scoring information used to generate the MonkeyDish list took into account details Liberal businesses have long relied upon: "Pull Factor," which calculates how many customers travel to Liberal to shop, do business and spend money, as well as geographic and economic scores. Even so, Parsons was still sorting through the information gathered by Monkey Dish.

"They list Liberal as having 54 restaurants, and I'm not sure that's true to reality," he said. "That may be based on businesses that have licenses to serve food, but are not truly walk-in retail."

What Parsons is most interested in is the general notion that there's plenty of room for expansion in Liberal, whether that means more tables or new facilities for existing restaurants, or additions to the local menu of eateries. He said worries about competitors whittling away at long-established and successful businesses are misguided.

"I completely see where they're coming from, but I don't look at it like slicing the same pie into smaller pieces," Parsons said. "You build more restaurants, stores, attractions, and you get more people coming into Liberal to shop and eat. Each participant is going to bring in more money because we have increased the total number of people in the equation."

That is the goal of the city's involvement with Retail Attractions, which relies on the same market research generated by Monkey Dish, and then uses it to woo business developers to Liberal.

"Retail Attractions takes those numbers, and explains that to the people who would be a good match for Liberal. They are actively going out to get things moving."

And while national reports can stoke enthusiasm, Parsons said a long-term view is critical.

"We're in that period where you plant a seed, and then it's a long time before you have a plant to look at," he said. "This is that part, the waiting part. It's nothing exciting. It's not like we hire Retail Attractions and then people start rolling into town in the next month. It has to be cultivated, with an eye on what retailers and developers want to do in 2014, 2015. That's what they are thinking about how, those decisions."

At Monkey Dish, a similar look-ahead attitude prevails. The site offers articles with titles like "Can nothing stop yogurt?" and "Profits over easy: the potential of breakfast." While restaurant owners and operators may benefit from the savvy advice about hiring employees, marketing creatively and looking at Liberal as the next great location, they are probably noting some other facts, too.

"Competition is more intense than ever," the site cautions. "The restaurants in communities with

high RGI numbers are doing gangbusters. And it suggests ... that competition sharpens and magnifies the difference between the best and the average.”

Parsons hopes that will translate into more choices for Liberal diners.

“We talk about retail leakage in communities, places where people choose to go elsewhere to spend their money,” Parsons said. “Liberal has big numbers in that category of full- and limited-service restaurants. So we’re interested in bringing more restaurants in, and we have hopes that we’ll get something good out of this.”

What is Monkey Dish?

Built as a time-saving resource for the busy restaurant entrepreneur, MonkeyDish collects content that operators can use but often don't have time to find themselves. And through partnerships with such industry heavyweights as the Culinary Institute of America, Technomic and Bill Main, the site is populated with great how-to content, from video tutorials to downloadable worksheets, templates and policy forms. Restauranters can find inspiration and ideas about everything from how to make decorative whipped-milk designs on cups of latte to strategies for where to build a new restaurant. The website can be found at www.monkeydish.com. Information about Liberal is located beneath the “Growth” tab, among the listings of communities to watch.