

Small town packs big punch among corporate giants

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WILMINGTON — Keen readers of news of recent legal turmoil at The Walt Disney Co. might be forgiven for puzzling briefly over the dateline for the stories.

It wasn't Los Angeles. It wasn't New York. It wasn't even Orlando, Fla., or Anaheim, Calif.

It was Wilmington, a city that should, by all rights, barely rate a blip on the map. It's a city so small that four Wilmingtons could fit comfortably inside Disneyland with a few square miles left over. It's a city that ranks a whopping 367th on the list of most populous U.S. cities, sandwiched between Miramar, Fla., and Napa, Calif.

It's not even the largest city named Wilmington — that honor goes to city number 351, the Wilmington in North Carolina.

But, as the Disney stories attest, the Delaware version of Wilmington has a national — and even international — profile that wildly exceeds its size.

"It's great; Delaware is known for its court system," Mayor James M. Baker said with a laugh.

But it really is serious business.

Wilmington is home to dozens of regional, national and even international headquarters. Sure, some of them, such as Disney, are merely located in Wilmington on paper, set up to take advantage of Delaware's liberal incorporation laws and low corporate taxes.

Many of the companies, however, including chemical giant DuPont, set up substantial physical offices. It's hard to pin down exactly what this means to the city financially, but it is fair to say it accounts for much of the \$74 million in wage and property taxes the city collects every year.

And the companies that do invest and

stay tend to be actively involved in the community. The companies invest in nonprofit groups such as Habitat for Humanity, and endow cultural and sporting events.

"For us, it has been a tremendous partnership that has really allowed us to grow our nonprofit operation here in New Castle County," said Kevin Smith, executive director of the county Habitat chapter.

The county operation builds 21 houses for low-income residents every year, with a budget of \$3 million and 1,500 volunteers, many of whom are workers from major headquarters companies. That makes Smith's chapters one of the country's top Habitat chapters.

The major companies, such as MBNA and DuPont give employees paid leave to volunteer. That, Smith said, ends up helping all nonprofit groups since it creates a thriving volunteer culture that a city this size might not otherwise enjoy.

The community investment is, in part, "enlightened self-interest," said Dale Ervin, director of economic development for the New Castle County Chamber of Commerce.

"When there is a physical location with employees, the employees live here, work here, educate their kids here ... it's a quality-of-life issue," she said. "These headquarters companies are in competition for top talent. Part of attracting talent to your company is having a great quality of life for your employees."

The small size of the city — about 73,000 people on a mere 10 square miles of land — tends to be an advantage in itself, said Delaware's only congressman, Michael Castle, himself a Wilmington resident. Since the city and state are both small, he said, corporate leaders can get the attention of the mayor, the governor and the members of Congress in a way that would be impossible in larger states.

The corporation's workers, meanwhile, enjoy a cheaper and more leisurely life-

style than perhaps any other part of the busy Northeast Corridor.

"I talk to a lot of people — they come to live in Wilmington and they enjoy it," Castle said. "The slogan of the city is 'A place to be somebody,' and there is a lot of truth to it. It's small; you can get around. You can enjoy the lifestyle."

Citizens Bank opened its state headquarters in the city three years ago and is already sponsoring a summer concert series and several charity drives, along with helping to finance the building of the new AAA headquarters in town.

"We see the city of Wilmington as essential to the economic health of the state," said Richelle Vible, president and

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CEO of Citizens Bank in Delaware.

The bank, along with the Wilmington Blue Rocks, a farm team for the Boston Red Sox, recently completed a project collecting school supplies for 500 poor students. The bank placed collection boxes at all its branches and facilities and provided the 500 backpacks in which the school supplies were given to the kids.

"We try to get involved in the communities where we are located ... it's what our customers want and what our communities want," she said.

"It's cheaper to live here, but you're strategically located."

James M. Baker
mayor,
City of Wilmington

But Vible has a greater stake in the city than her professional ties. She and her husband, a Delaware native, moved to Wilmington 20 years ago and have raised their three children in the city.

"It's a really nice quality of life," she said.

Because the city is home to so many professional people, drawn by the big employers, Wilmington enjoys cultural attractions that cit-

ies of a similar size might not. The city is home to the Delaware Art Museum, the Delaware Museum of Natural History, the Delaware Symphony Orchestra, the Delaware Theater Co., the First State Ballet Co., the Grand Opera House, the Brandywine Zoo and the DuPont Theater, which hosts Broadway productions.

And if that's not good enough for you, residents say, there are plenty of bigger cities — Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and New York — within a few hours' traveling time.

"If you want to live a really nice lifestyle and not worry about the hustle-bustle so much, and the stress of a big city, living here is great," Baker said. "It's cheaper to live here, but you're strategically located so that, if you want to have the best of the best, you can go to any one of these great cities within two hours." ■