

By PAUL A. ANTHONY, panthony@sastandardtimes.com or 659-8237

City among best in South

Southern Living readers rank San Angelo as top in Texas

Connie McCullough is a self-described San Angelo booster, so needless to say, she was pleased when she opened the February issue of Southern Living magazine.

There, in somewhat small print, was a mention that San Angelo was voted by the magazine's readers to be one of the best Southern cities.

"I was surprised to see San Angelo listed with all the big towns," said McCullough, who was born in Bronte and returned to the area after living 10 years elsewhere. "That's just because of the people in San Angelo. We have great people."

It was surprising to Southern Living editors, too, said Karen Lingo, senior writer for special projects at the magazine.

But it's no typo.

San Angelo finished seventh of 20 cities named by the magazine's readers in the "Southern City" category, Lingo said. Although it finished well behind top vote-getter Charleston, S.C., and other cream-of-the-crop cities such as Atlanta and New Orleans, she said, it beat out Austin, Dallas and Memphis, Tenn., and ran neck-and-neck with Nashville and others.

No city in Texas polled higher.

"It was really surprising to me," Lingo said. "But I think San Angelo is wonderful. I enjoy my visits."

The magazine, which is running the results from its 2005 Readers' Choice Awards in its February edition, listed the Top 4 vote-getters - Charleston; Savannah, Ga.; New Orleans; and Atlanta. They added in a blurb above the ranking that, "Others receiving a major number of votes include Nashville, Tennessee and San Angelo, Texas."

"Oh, wow!" said Chamber of Commerce President Michael Dalby when he read the blurb. "Being in a list of cities like that is a huge honor. What you're seeing is people wanting a town like San Angelo as an alternative to the major metropolitan areas."

San Angelo and Nashville received about the same number of votes, in a group with Asheville, N.C., Lingo said. The Pearl of the Concho finished directly ahead of Birmingham, Ala., she said.

Lingo declined to release the exact vote totals, saying that she did not want to embarrass low-ranking cities or set a precedent by releasing even one city's vote total.

More than 22,000 people cast ballots electronically, she said. Multiple voting is not allowed.

"We could have just had a lot of readers who'd been there recently and really enjoyed it," Lingo said, adding that Texas tends to be underrepresented in the awards because readers focus on the Deep South.

The awards focus on travel, Lingo said, which means a city is usually considered a good tourist draw if it lands high on the list.

Fredericksburg, about 120 miles southeast of San Angelo, also received mention as a top "Small Southern Town."

Dalby cited a number of reasons visitors might have been so impressed with the city, including the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts and the Concho River walk.

"It's fantastic to get that kind of recognition from a publication like Southern Living," he said.