



#MyAlton: How does Alton compare to the competition?

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Tuesday morning at 6:30 a.m., Altonians were told they were one of five towns entering the final level of competition for Deluxe Corporation's third season of the *Small Business Revolution*.

To celebrate, the entire town has been canvassing social media with ways to vote for Alton, and tagging posts with "#MyAlton" - a hashtag to draw the attention of the show's producers to showcase the city. *Small Business Revolution* host Amanda Brinkman and this season's co-host Ty Pennington from *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* said Alton was chosen because of its small businesses, charming personality, and reputation for being haunted.

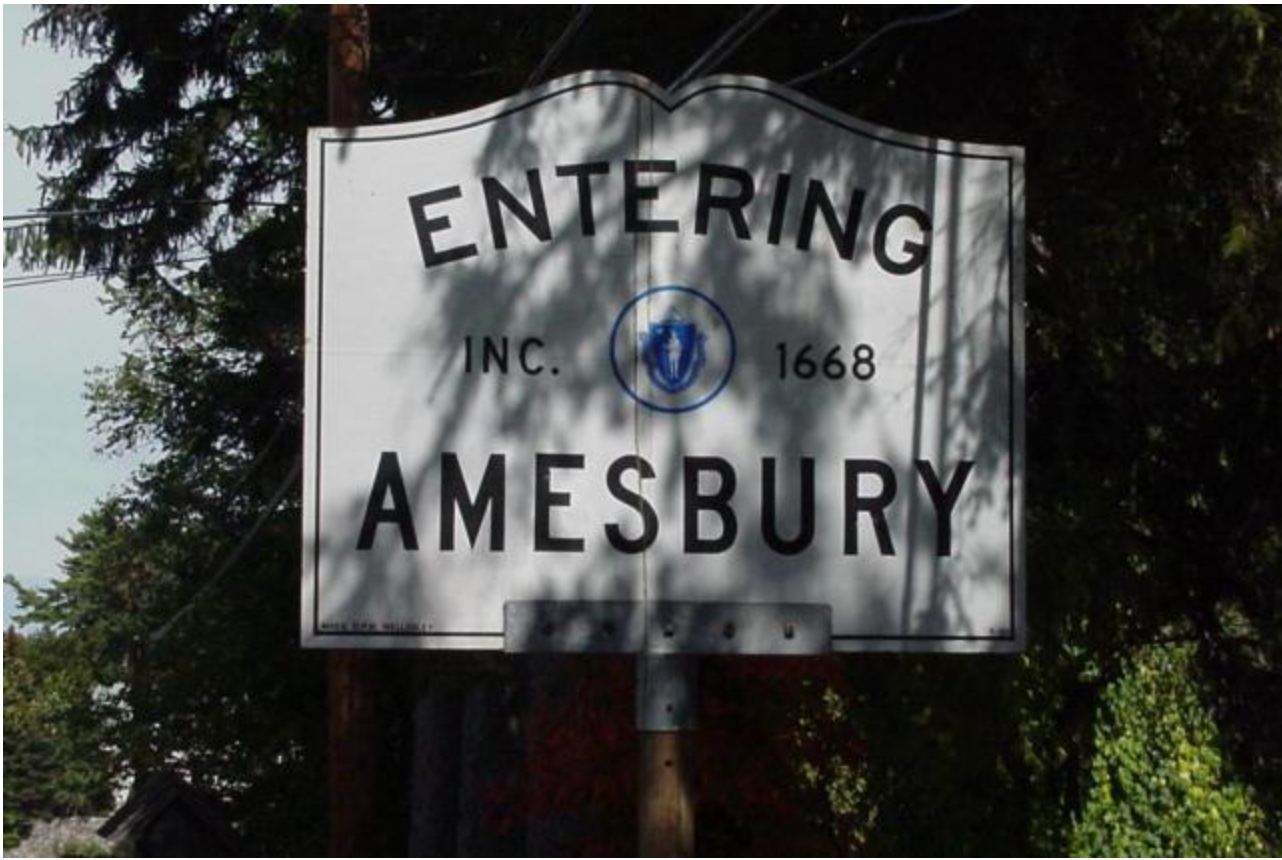
Voting for Alton can be done [here](#).

Since it reached the top five, the contest has been taken to a national vote. Alton is in the running against Amesbury, Massachusetts, Bastrop, Texas, Martinez, California, and Siloam Springs, Arkansas. The winning town is featured in the show's third season and will have \$500,000 worth of investment into the city and as many as six local businesses.

So, what does Alton's competition look like? Brinkman and Pennington said towns were selected for several factors, including natural and architectural beauty, history, business community and overall culture.

Riverbender.com contacted members of the leadership of each of Alton's new rivals and asked them what made them unique. Here are the responses:

Amesbury, Massachusetts





Amesbury, Massachusetts Mayor Kenneth Gray said his town is currently celebrating their 350th year of existence.

During that celebration, Gray said the town will honor all the major industries once flourishing there. When cars were taking over for horses and carriages, Amesbury was the largest manufacturer of carriages. As cars hit the market, the town became known for designing the bodies of cars. Gray said many early automobile manufacturers would contract body manufacturing from carriage builders in Amesbury after building unique engines and chassis.

"There were hundreds of manufacturers in those early days," Gray said. "We built them for early Fords, Cadillacs, Pierce-Arrows and Chevrolets. Chevy even named an early car after our town."

Locally-owned Bailey Company even manufactured the Bailey Electric Automobile in Amesbury from 1907-1913.

In the 20th century, Amesbury was known for making hats. The Merrimac Hat Company made hats for both men and women through the 1960s, which were the most popular hats in the entire nation.

Before the days of hats and carriages, when most states were not even incorporated in the union, Amesbury built ships for use in what was then America's Navy. Gray said some of the first wooden ships built in that force were built in his town.

Amesbury was also the birthplace of George McNeill, one of the founders of the American Labor Movement who gave the nation the eight-hour work day. It was the home of Josiah Bartlett, who signed the Declaration of Independence, and John Greenly Whittier, an abolitionist poet.

It has a population of around 15,000 people and is located about 45 minutes away from Boston, near the border of New Hampshire. In fact, Gray said his town celebrated Tuesday morning mostly because they beat Exeter, New Hampshire - a town 10 miles from them, which also made the top 10 towns for season three of the *Small Business Revolution*.

Bastrop, Texas



Bastrop made national news in 2011 when the largest wildfire in Texas history burnt portions of the town, Mayor Connie Schroeder said.

She added the town has since rebuilt what was lost, and is done talking about the fire. She said everyone is excited to see the future of the town - whose main street is full of buildings in various states of flux. She said many entrepreneurs see vacant buildings as an opportunity to pursue their dreams. While many find success, she said some do not have the know-how to properly help those businesses thrive - a problem she hopes Deluxe Corporation's *Small Business Revolution* can help.

"Bless their pea-picking hearts, it's a hobby for some, and they're real passionate, but being passionate about starting a small business doesn't mean you know how to have a social media presence, or do accounting or even know how to do the day-to-day operations," Schroeder said. "Because of that, we have lots of building turnover."



When the capitol of Texas was being chosen, Bastrop lost by one vote to nearby Austin. But, Schroeder, who is the first female mayor in the city, said she is looking toward the future of the city first and foremost.

"My husband, who was born and raised here said, 'it's time they're ready here - in fact, it's probably past time,' Schroeder said.

Schroeder said many of the town's nearly 10,000 permanent residents were at Neighbors Yard and Kitchen, a small business, which opened more than three hours early to live-stream the official announcement.



"We had the sheriff, the police chief, several council members and at least one person from all the small businesses representing," she said. "We wanted to watch it on Facebook live, so we could all find out together."

The town's population grows during the day, as it is the county seat and has a retail area of approximately 190 square miles, which encompasses around 200,000 people. One of the favorite small businesses in town is the Coppershot Moonshine Distillery, which utilizes water from the nearby Colorado River to make the spirit (which, Schroeder said is often enjoyed along the shores of that river as well).

Martinez, California



The largest town in the running is Martinez, with a population of approximately 36,000.

While that may seem like a lot, by California standards, it is a small town. Martinez Main Street Executive Director Leanne Peterson said the town is in constant competition with larger towns and cities nearby. The city is located nearly an hour from San Francisco, and is a part of the Greater Bay Area.

Martinez may best be known for its gift of the martini to the world, Peterson said. She said the city hosts a Martini Festival every September in which local area bartenders enter a citywide competition to make the best martini.

The other gift to the world granted by Martinez was Joe DiMaggio. Peterson said DiMaggio gifted his hometown his boat, called the "Joltin' Joe," which will be part of a museum being planned by the city. There is also a private professional baseball club being established in the city in honor of DiMaggio, called the Martinez Clippers.

"If we were a glass of water, we would be filled nearly to the top, with the surface tension about to pour over," Martinez Community and Economic Development Director Christina Ratcliffe said.



Ratcliffe said a good amount of historic buildings in the city's downtown were becoming available, and were being revitalized by new owners and entrepreneurs. She said the largest industry in the town is an oil refinery managed by Shell Oil, but retail and eateries in the city were on the rise.

"Every thing in Martinez is authentic," Ratcliffe said. "There's a real feel to everything here. It's very walkable. You walk around downtown, and people say hi to you."

Environmentalism is also a crucial part of Martinez, both Peterson and Ratcliffe said. The former home of naturalist John Muir has been made into a park in the city, and Earth Day is celebrated there every year.

Since the announcement came at 4:30 a.m. Pacific Time, Peterson said Martinez did not host a large celebration. She said she was awake watching the Facebook stream, but said most people waited for a decent hour to begin the inevitable wave of excited emails and social media postings.

Siloam Springs, Arkansas



Named for healing springs in the Bible, Siloam Springs, Arkansas is home to 28 springs, a different Illinois River and Sanger Creek, which winds through the heart of the town.

Located in Northwest Arkansas, which is one of the most developing areas in the country, Siloam Springs once considered itself a hidden gem. Those days are finished now that they have entered the top five competition for Deluxe Corporation's *Small Business Revolution*, Siloam Springs Communication Officer Holland Hayden said.

Hayden originally hailed from Dallas, Texas, but said she would not dream of living anywhere else since settling in the town.

"It's a beautiful setting with a gorgeous downtown," she said. "We have wonderful natural features, and activities such as mountain biking, kayaking and being an idyllic place for fishing. It's beautiful here, and everyone is so nice."



Founded in 1880, Siloam Springs flourished during the heyday of healing springs. Because of the rumored healing powers of the city's natural hot springs, tourism was vital for the town's quick rise and subsequent growth. Unfortunately, however, springs alone could not continue the town's thriving roots.

In the last four years, however, people in Siloam Springs have really begun to appreciate the town, its people and the natural beauty, Hayden said. She said people in the town are starting to "buy-in" and really begin investing in their hometown. She hopes winning the contest to be showcased on *Small Business Revolution* season three will help push that trend further.

She credits that personal investment partially to the city's great leadership, non-profit groups and its faith-based community.

"People are realizing how good it is here," she said. "A creek runs through the middle of town and into the Illinois River. We have a kayak park built on the river and incorporated into the city. It's so pretty here."

Hayden said the city works with the city's Main Street and its chamber of commerce in order to help foster more economic growth and tourism. Since receiving the news of reaching the top five towns for season three of the *Small Business Revolution*, those three organizations are working together to get out the votes.

