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Kimberly White / Bloomberg News

ROLLIN': At its headquarters, Google offers employees services including haircuts and the use of bicycles.

Google is big man on and off campus

The Internet giant has helped its hometown grow. Some say it hasn't been a model citizen.

By Jessica Gynn and Michelle Quinn, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers
October 1, 2007

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. — Bracing for an invasion of Google Inc. employees in February after the Internet search giant bought up its office complex, start-up Beyond.com erected a makeshift sign: "I for one welcome our Google overlords."

The one-liner, lifted from an episode of "The Simpsons," captured the ambivalence felt by Mountain View inhabitants over how rapidly Google is taking over their sleepy Silicon Valley community (population 73,000). The same company that blankets the city with free wireless Internet access and funds Mountain View's high-tech bookmobile also clogs the streets with traffic and bothers residents by flying corporate jets overhead.

Never has a Silicon Valley company risen so fast. Only nine years after its inception and three years after going public, Google is the third-most-valuable tech company, behind No. 1 Microsoft Corp. and No. 2 Cisco Systems Inc., thanks to its search engine and other Web services that in its second fiscal quarter generated an average of \$43 million in revenue each day.



GRAPHIC
Executive privilege
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Since 2004, Google has quintupled its global workforce to nearly 14,000. The modern headquarters here, dubbed the Googleplex, is filled with pets, colorful exercise balls to sit on and nearly every service imaginable.

To many in Mountain View, Google has become a primary source of economic aid, curiosity, inspiration and pride.

After four years of city budget cuts and hiring freezes, Google has helped fuel an economic renaissance. The effect is difficult to quantify, officials say, in part because Google's contributions are growing faster than city tax rolls can reflect.

Two years ago, Google ranked 21st in Santa Clara County for assessed business property — computers, fax machines and other taxable business equipment. Today it's fourth, behind only Cisco, Intel Corp. and Lockheed Martin Space Systems Co.

The Internet giant restored corporate leadership after the dot-com bust, attracting smaller companies that wanted to be close to greatness. Its constant quest for cubicle space has helped shrink the commercial vacancy rate to 10% from nearly 30%.

Google bought more property in the county last year than anyone except for three commercial real estate firms. It's in talks with the city to build a hotel and conference center on the Google side of town, which would help Mountain View realize a long-held dream.

"Google is what pulled us through," said Russell Hancock, president of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network, a regional planning group.

The company also has injected Mountain View, which sits almost 40 miles southeast of San

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Name origin: A play on "googol," the number represented by the numeral 1 followed by 100 zeros.

Headquarters: The Googleplex in Mountain View, Calif.

CEO: Eric Schmidt, a veteran of Novell Inc. and Sun Microsystems, who joined in August 2001.

Founders: Larry Page and Sergey Brin, while Stanford University graduate students

IPO: Aug. 19, 2004; raised \$1.67 billion, making Google worth more than \$23 billion

Current market value: \$177 billion

2006 revenue: \$10.6 billion

Employees: 13,748 full-time employees as of June 30. In June 2004, Google had 2,292 workers. Employees are "Googlers"; new workers, "Nooglers"; and former employees, "Xooglers."

Amenities: Gourmet food, on-site doctors, shuttle service, oil change, carwash, dry cleaning, massage therapy, gym, hair stylist, fitness classes, bike repair


Source: Times research

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Francisco, with the kind of energy usually associated with a liberal arts college. Googlers, as they're known, toss Frisbees, glide around campus on bicycles sporting bright orange safety flags and pedal together on company-provided seven-seaters while discussing software code. Tourists snap pictures in front of the Googleplex.

Locals enjoy pranking Google. Public relations firm Eastwick Communications stages team-building contests that challenge employees to sneak into Google's free cafeteria. Bernadette Albrecht, a human resources consultant at Eastwick, won a \$50 gift certificate by asking a biking Googler to give her his orange flag.

"He hesitated, but he said they replace them all the time," Albrecht said.

But Mountain View and Google are grappling with town-and-gown issues. Some influential Mountain View residents grumble that Google hasn't been a model corporate citizen: It has escalated the pain of rush hour, displaced small companies to make room for its own troops and raised a ruckus by striking an unusual deal for Google's billionaire cofounders to land their private planes at NASA's nearby Moffett Federal Airfield.

Some residents worry about how disconnected Google seems from the community. The company occupies a private oasis on the other side of Highway 101 from downtown. The city has installed more traffic lights and is considering adding more sidewalks and bicycle lanes on highway overpasses to accommodate Googlers who might want to head downtown.

But Google's stock-option millionaires don't have much reason to patronize local stores and restaurants. To keep employees working hard, the company offers gourmet meals, haircuts, dentist and doctor visits, massage therapy, carwashes and oil changes -- all at the Googleplex. Google also gives free rides to and from work every day aboard 32 shuttle buses that run on biodiesel.

In many ways, founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin have built the Independent Republic of Google within Mountain View's borders, annexing more of the city as its soaring advertising revenue pays for ambitious corporate expansion. Some fear Google is beginning to dominate the small city the way it dominates the Internet.

"You don't really know what's going on in there," said Kevin Cuneo, who grew up in nearby Redwood City and now works at Eastwick. "It's a huge, growing mass. No one knows when it's going to end."

Google says it takes seriously its responsibility to be a good neighbor. The company gave the city a \$200,000 bookmobile that's environmentally friendly and features laptops that fold down from outside the vehicle. It operates a free citywide wireless network. And it provides grants to local nonprofits, lets local police train on campus and maintains a nature trail.

Some local businesses have seen a direct benefit from Google's expansion. Brothers Neil and Kurt Jehning are so busy changing office-door locks that they have spent the last year trying to recruit more locksmiths.

"We've been a part of the Mountain View community for a while now, and many of our own employees call this city home," said David Radcliffe, Google's vice president of real estate and workplace services. "We engage with the community in a whole host of different, innovative ways and are always looking for even better ways to integrate ourselves into our neighborhood."

Page and Brin created the Web-searching technology behind Google while computer science graduate students at Stanford University. In 1998, they moved the fledgling company from Page's dorm room to a friend's Menlo Park garage and then to a Palo Alto office. After outgrowing several spaces, Google moved to Mountain View in 2003.

The city is no stranger to the high-tech set. It may not have the cachet of nearby Palo Alto, but over the years Mountain View has been the corporate home to such stalwarts as Netscape Communications, PayPal and Silicon Graphics.

For a few years Page and Brin didn't know how to make much money, but they struck gold when Google decided to let advertisers bid to have their websites promoted in the blue links above and alongside the regular search results. As other companies imploded when the dot-com bubble burst, Google quietly expanded. The company went public in August 2004. Driven by its revenue growth, high profit margins and broad ambitions, it's now valued at \$177 billion.

Some of that wealth has found its way into the local economy. Although Google won't disclose how many of its employees work in its headquarters, the company says about 1,500 employees make their home here and contribute to the local economy. There is a downside, some say: Googlers compete with each other to buy property, pricing some middle-class buyers out of the market.

Most troubling to some residents and community activists in Mountain View and nearby Sunnyvale was their discovery last month that Page and Brin had crafted an unusual arrangement to turn Moffett Federal Airfield into their personal runway.

NASA's Ames Research Center, which owns the former Moffett Field Naval Air Station, and Google say the arrangement is part of a broad partnership to fund scientific research that benefits taxpayers. Google pays NASA at least \$1.3 million a year to help defray the cost of maintaining the airfield. It also has placed instruments on the founders' Boeing 767 wide-body and two Gulfstream Vs to collect scientific data during flights. NASA observed a meteor shower in August for free.

Google also is in serious negotiations to build a huge campus on the site.

"Google is a wonderful company whose founders have a genuine and deep interest in science, engineering and technology," said Steven Zornetzer, associate director for institutions and research at the Ames center. "Those interests are very synergistic with what we are doing."

He added that Google's jets were equipped with the quietest engines sold, and, when weather permits, the jets fly in and out over the bay -- rather than over land -- to minimize noise.

Critics contend that the Moffett Field landing rights smack of special privilege and treatment.

"Show us it's really there for scientific research and not a favor for someone who has a lot of money," said Lenny Siegel, a Mountain View resident who is the executive director of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight. "We want them to play by the rules."

Google insists that it does. The backlash surprised the company that says it lives by a well-meaning corporate code: "Don't be evil."

Page and Brin consider themselves a force for good in the world, with a billion-dollar foundation and corporate initiatives including grants for lunar explorers and small nonprofits.

Mountain View's Sempervirens Fund, one of the country's oldest conservation organizations, has seen its website traffic double thanks to \$5,000 worth of free search-engine advertising that Google provided.

"We see it as a blessing," membership director Melanie Kimbel said.

But some residents say Google should do more for its hometown, such as hosting more community events and taking a more visible role in sponsoring local organizations.

"They're there, but I don't see them," said Rosiland Bivings, a longtime community activist who sits on the Mountain View Library Foundation.

Perhaps that's because Google is so young compared with Hewlett-Packard Co., Applied Materials Inc. and other Silicon Valley elders that frequently spring for charitable events or run nonprofits that tackle local issues.

"It takes time to catch up," said David Ginsborg, deputy to Santa Clara County's assessor.

Organic farmer Victor Molinari owns two houses and a barn on Charleston Road across from Google. His parents bought the property in 1947 when the Googleplex was a dairy farm. Today he has to maneuver his produce truck around biking Googlers, but he doesn't mind.

"They are big. They have everything," Molinari said. "Let's hope it stays that way."

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