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IF YOU'RE THINKING OF LIVING IN | CENTRAL GREENWICH, CONN.

A Town With a Little City at Its Heart

By ELEANOR CHARLES

THE downtown business district of Greenwich, a famously baronial community, has always accommodated working people who are not millionaires. They have lived in harmony in rental apartments over the condominiums, midrise apartment houses, modest single-family and two-family homes, and larger homes on ample lots.

But in the past couple of years, the small-town atmosphere has been changing, with a cosmopolitan mix of residents moving in. They have been attracted by the smart, cityfied neighborhood that invites walking to everything: a movie, dinner, a drink, the 6:05 a.m. train to New York, a stroll in the park, world-class shopping, concerts, sailing, beaches, jobs in the corporations and shops.

Well-to-do young New York couples, older Greenwich residents scaling down from large homes, and suburban people of all ages have discovered the little city growing within the town of Greenwich.

Josh and Gillian Weisman, in their late 20's, moved into a town house off Greenwich Avenue in July 2003. "I truly feel like you're a hundred miles from the city," said Mr. Weisman, a former New Jersey resident who commutes to his trader's post at Monness, Crespi, Hardt in Manhattan. "There's so much shopping, plenty of restaurants — it's like living in New York."

Mrs. Weisman grew up in Cheshire. "I never thought I would move back to Connecticut," she said. "I love New York and didn't want to leave, but my husband did. I can still walk to Saks on Greenwich Avenue and I'm not missing it at all. This town has to offer. You go out for dinner and it's predominantly young couples sitting around the restaurant, and a lot of single people. You walk down Greenwich Avenue and you hear different accents and languages. Our friends come out and we take them to the beach. It's like living in a resort."

THE demand for downtown space exceeds the supply, said Jean Crocco, who founded Putnam Associates, an estate firm, in 1969. As a result, she said, "we are getting four condos where a house once stood, and prices have escalated incredibly." Properties that were \$300,000 and \$400,000 five years ago are now in the \$800,000 to \$900,000's, she said.

About 30 condos and 40 houses, some dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, are listed for sale, she said.

Marty and Amy Kindler bought a new condo last September at Hamilton Way on Hamilton Avenue after a month-long search for a larger apartment in Manhattan. He switched jobs from New York to GlobeOp Financial Services in Harrison, N.Y. — "an 11-minute drive without a light, 12 minutes with," he said. His wife commutes to her banking job on Wall Street — "six-tenths of a mile to the station," he said.

Theirs is one of 16 units built at the former site of two houses and a factory. The condominiums sold out

upper \$800,000's. Among the downsizing buyers from Greenwich's back country were two empty-nest couples and a widow with a teenage son.

The developer, Jerry Effren, is now building 16 identical town houses set between two subsidized housing projects on LeGrande Avenue, but priced in the high \$900,000's.

Scattered through Central Greenwich are pockets of narrow old curving streets filled with small homes and businesses where cars navigate turns that were meant for horses. On the other hand, homes on the three peninsulas that jut into Long Island Sound south of the turnpike can be palatial and can cost upward of \$14 million. "There is nothing on the Belle Haven peninsula under \$3 million," said Jackie Hammock, a broker at Coldwell Banker. The private Belle Haven Yacht Club has a pool, tennis, beach and restaurant, and gives residents of the gated Belle Haven community preference for membership.

Millbrook, an enclave of luxury homes, was built in the 30's on land that had been part of the enormous Boss Tweed estate. The old gatehouse was converted to a private home and overlooks the private Millbrook Club, which has a nine-hole golf course, tennis, swimming pools and a restaurant. Two homes are available at \$1.3 million and \$2.9 million, said Ms. Hammock. "But condos are selling better than houses," she said, "and there is a premium for downtown."

Central Greenwich has most of the town's office buildings, and Greenwich Avenue, six-tenths of a mile long, plus a few side streets and an adjoining section of the Post Road are crammed with 180 retailers, restaurants, service businesses, professional offices and two multiplex cinemas. So far Tiffany, Baccarat, the Gap, Ann Taylor and CVS have not put the locals like Betteridge Jewelers, Razook's women's clothes or Grannick's Pharmacy out of business.

When too much shopping is enough, Greenwich's Department of Parks and Recreation offers all kinds of things to do. Hop a ferry to Great Captain's Island or Island Beach, two of the town's four beaches, or try Greenwich Point, the 147-acre park and beach with wooded nature trails, pavilions and a sea-life museum in Old Greenwich. Resident beach cards are \$22 a season, \$5 for children, free for seniors.

Of the nine country clubs in the town, the Griffith E. Harris Golf Club is the only public 18-hole course. Residents who are 18 through 64 pay \$100 a season, those under 18 pay \$65 and those over 64 pay \$55. In addition, there are greens fees of \$10 to \$18, depending on the day of the week. Guests are charged \$48 a day.

The right to use more than a dozen tennis courts around town and a lighted paddle tennis court cost \$22 a season, \$10 a day for guests. The Dorothy Hamill skating rink, named for the hometown champion, offers public skating for \$4 an hour, \$2 for children; group lessons; birthday parties; and ice hockey.

INDIAN HARBOR, one of three private yacht clubs, is at the tip of Steamboat Road. Its 400 members are serious sailors. The residential Indian Harbor Association (not connected to the yacht club) has been home variously to Donald Trump, Mel Gibson, Diana Ross, Kathie Lee and Frank Gifford, Joan Lunden and Michelle Marsh of Channel 4.

Permits for using municipal marinas at Grass Island, and outside Central Greenwich at Cos Cob and Byram, are \$55 a season, plus fees based on boat size that vary from \$170 to \$340.

Well over 1,100 acres of parklands townwide are open to the public for picnicking, hiking, in-line skating or just observing the flora and fauna.

Within Central Greenwich, Roger Sherman Baldwin Park is the site of free summer concerts and a newly opened skateboard and in-line skating park with jumps and ramps. Bruce Park has ball fields, a horseshoe pit, a pond, playground, tennis courts and picnicking.

The nucleus of a large aggregation of cultural organizations includes the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, the Playmakers' full-scale shows, the Greenwich Symphony Orchestra, Greenwich Chamber Players, Greenwich Art Center and Greenwich Art Society.

Central Greenwich children are served by Central Middle School, Greenwich High School and Julian Curtiss Elementary School, nicknamed "the United Nations School" for having the most culturally, ethnically and economically diverse student body in town. Of the town's total enrollment of 8,800 students in 11 elementary schools, three middle schools and one high school, some 1,400 are dominant in a language other than English; 41 languages are represented.

Larry Leverett, superintendent of the public school system, says his mission "is to add value to the performance range of the very successful student, the children in the middle and those who are not succeeding."

"This is a diverse community with very high educational standards," Dr. Leverett said, "but communities that were once homogeneous are changing."

Scores on the SAT reasoning tests in 2002 were 549 in the verbal test and 567 in mathematics, exceeding the state average of 509 and 509 and the national average of 504 and 516, respectively. Parents also have a choice of nine private schools within the town, four of them in Central Greenwich.

Greenwich library is well known for its extensive services to the business community, its computers for the public, homey lounge areas for reading, seminars, movies, concerts, puppet shows and a cabaret series. It lends more than 300,000 domestic and foreign books, paperbacks, videos, Books on Tape, artwork, magazines and newspapers. Individual study rooms are available, as are \$125 annual memberships for nonresidents, who make up 4 percent of the 58,000 card holders.

In 1931 the main library was installed in the converted 62,000-square-foot Franklin Simon department store, and in 1999 a 42,000-square-foot wing designed by Cesar Pelli was built with a \$26 million endowment from the Clementine Lockwood Peterson Foundation.

Home seekers should be aware that relatively reasonably priced residences do exist in Central Greenwich, said Ms. Crocco, the real estate agent. Well-maintained condos built in the 50's are available at Putnam Park for \$340,000 to \$415,000 and at Putnam Hill, where three-bedroom, two-bath units cost \$425,000 to \$535,000, she said.

Lee Parfray, who is from Greenwich, England, lives in a similar complex called Green Glen. She moved to Greenwich in 1969 when the New York company she worked for pulled up stakes and settled where the company president lived. "Everyone was doing it," she said, referring to the trend at that time for businesses to leave big city crime, costs and crowds and follow the chief executive to the country.

"It was just a sleepy town then, until Woolworth's was sold for \$12 million," a stunning price at the time for a five-and-ten-cent store, she said. "Nobody had ever heard of such a price, in spite of the wealthy people who lived in the back country. Today, Greenwich Avenue is taken over by the big national stores. The chemist and shopkeepers who knew you by name don't exist anymore, but it's still a very nice place to live and our taxes are a lot less than other places."

Ms. Parfray lives in retirement now in the same three-bedroom town house that she bought in 1974 for \$53,500. "Today it's worth \$450,000," she said.

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