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REAL ESTATE

If You're Thinking of Living In/Livingston, N.J.; On Stagecoach Route, a Commuter Haven

By JERRY CHESLOW APRIL 18, 2004

RAGESH AGARWAL likens his home-buying experience in Livingston, N.J., to combat. After losing several houses rather than enter into bidding wars, Mr. Argawal, a vice president at Merrill Lynch in Manhattan, and his wife, Anju, bit the bullet, going through two agonizing rounds of bidding against other would-be buyers for their four-bedroom ranch. They eventually paid \$637,000, which was \$8,000 over the seller's original asking price, closing last October.

"We wanted to live in a town that was not far from Manhattan and had a highly ranked school system and minimal crime," Mr. Agarwal recalls. "We saw our house on Saturday and bid on Sunday against multiple offers. It was very tense, with hour-by-hour changes, a lot of money at stake and no room for error."

According to Punam Bhargava, a sales representative with Prudential New Jersey Properties, the Agarwals' experience is typical of Livingston, a 14-square-mile Essex County community 19 miles from Manhattan. "Nearly every home that shows well and is priced right, in whatever price range, seems to get five offers over the asking price," she said.

Despite the hot market, Ms. Bhargava maintains that the Agarwals got a bargain in their 3,300 square-foot-house, which sits on a half-acre lot. "If

Livingston had a train station," she said, "a house that sells for \$800,000 would cost more than \$1 million."

Even without a station, Livingston is a convenient commuter suburb, fringed by U.S. Route 280 to the east and bisected by New Jersey Highway 10. Called Mount Pleasant Avenue as it passes through the township, Highway 10 was laid out in the early 1800's as a stagecoach route from Newark to Morristown, connecting Essex and Morris Counties.

Named for William Livingston, the first post-colonial governor of New Jersey, the township was supported by the lumber, dairy and shoe industries until after World War II, when the population exploded. From 1950 through 1970, Livingston tripled in population to 31,653 from 9,932.

According to the 2000 census, 80 percent of Livingston's homes were built between 1940 and 1980. The township's 9,000 or so single-family houses range from small 750-square-foot Cape Cods, ranches and prewar colonials near the center of town to multimillion-dollar mansions.

The largest of these is a 40-room fieldstone house that once belonged to the late Robert W. Kean, a United States congressman who was father of Thomas Kean, the former New Jersey governor. The mansion, which was built a century ago and which stretches across Windermere Court, along the West Orange line, is now owned by a physician and is worth more than \$7 million, according to Ms. Bhargava.

Most of the houses are split-levels or colonials on lots of a quarter to a half acre that sell for \$500,000 to \$700,000. Thirty-year-old houses on flat, one-acre lots are fetching more than \$900,000 and large new homes often sell for over \$2 million.

Recently, a small three-bedroom 1950's ranch on Fellswood Drive in the center of town was listed at \$329,000. It drew multiple offers and sold within a week for more than \$350,000, according to R. Shelly Umanoff, manager of Gail Lowenstein Realtors. "Half of the offers came from builders who wanted to do a quick renovation or build a second story and

resell it," she said. "The buyers are a young family who will renovate the house and add a second story, making it into a \$600,000 four-bedroom colonial."

At the beginning of April, 65 single-family houses were on the Multiple Listing Service, with 10 of them already under contract. The homes ranged from a small three-bedroom Cape Cod on Collins Terrace near the center of town, listed for \$299,900, to a 6,975-square-foot, 14-room-custom colonial with a three-car garage on Trafalgar Drive in the eastern section near the West Orange line, listed for \$2.599 million

Livingston also has three condominium complexes, all built within the last six years: the 300-unit Pointe on Eisenhower Parkway, the 214-unit Fairways on State Highway 10 and the 283-unit Regency on South Orange Avenue. At the beginning of April, 15 condominiums were listed for sale, ranging in price from \$341,900 for a two-bedroom, two-bath, one-story unit with a garage in The Pointe up to \$799,000 for a three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath town house with an exercise room and a two-car garage on Winged Foot Drive in The Fairways. Of the 15 units, three were under contract.

"With about 60 homes on the market, there is no inventory," Ms. Umanoff lamented. "I have 20 customers looking for homes and I'm just one of dozens of realtors."

More than one-third of Livingston's population is Jewish and one-quarter is Asian, according to Mayor Gary S. Schneiderman. Six of the 22 houses of worship are synagogues and two of the churches are Korean. Fifty-eight percent of adults over 25 have bachelor's degrees or higher, more than twice the national average. A local business directory lists 23 accounting firms, 45 dental practices, 73 lawyers and 120 medical offices or related medical services.

The mayor maintains that many of the medical offices are attracted to Livingston by the 620-bed St. Barnabas Medical Center on Old Short Hills Road in the southeast corner of the township. Ranked by AARP in 2002 as

the best hospital in New Jersey and the 13th best in the nation, the nonsectarian facility treats more than 300,000 patients and delivers 7,000 babies annually.

ANOTHER major attraction, according to Mayor Schneiderman, is the highly rated 5,159-student, K-12 Livingston Public School District. It is divided into six K-5 elementary schools, Mount Pleasant Middle School for sixth graders, Heritage Middle School for grades 7 and 8 and the 1,540-student Livingston High School. Nearly 70 percent of the teachers systemwide have advanced degrees and four of the six elementary schools scored in the top 10 percent in the state on last year's fourth-grade achievement tests.

The system provides gifted and talented programs from grade two and a broad range of courses in the high school, including forensic science, jewelry making and, from next year, Russian language. "If children have special interests, we probably have a course to satisfy those interests," said the superintendent of schools, Dr. Mark Mongon. "We have 63 athletic teams in the high school, with about 70 percent of our students participating in sports."

Livingston High School, where 75 percent of the teachers hold advanced degrees, regularly sends about 95 percent of its graduates to two- or four-year colleges. All classrooms and the media center have computers with Internet access. The school offers 17 advanced placement courses in the sciences, computer science, English, history, mathematics, art and foreign languages.

On last year's SAT reasoning tests, Livingston High School students scored a combined verbal and mathematics average of 1,163, compared with a state average of 994. In 1998, Livingston High was awarded the prestigious Blue Ribbon for Excellence by the United States Department of Education, and, in its 2000 survey of the best schools in the state, New Jersey Monthly magazine ranked Livingston High as 14th.

"We are successful because we have very involved parents and very intelligent students taught by teachers with real expertise," Dr. Mongon said. "And we offer challenging course work in every area."

The school system has grown by 1,000 students in the last decade, and is projected to swell to 5,800 by 2009. Over the last three years, additions have been built to all but one of the elementary schools and to the middle schools, at a cost of \$24 million.

Livingston also has three private schools -- the pre-K-8 Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy and the Kushner Yeshiva High School, which share a campus on South Orange Avenue, and the Roman Catholic Aquinas Academy, which accepts children from age 2 1/2 through eighth grade. At Kushner, tuition in the lower school ranges from \$6,485 for kindergarten students to \$7,927 for eighth graders. In the high school, tuition is \$10,305 plus \$4,000 in fees. Tuition rates at Aquinas are related to parents during the admission interview.

Many residents complain that Livingston lacks a walking downtown business district. However, it does offer abundant and varied shopping opportunities. There are three supermarkets and national chains are represented at the 105-store Livingston Mall, anchored by Sears, Macy's and Lord & Taylor, on Eisenhower Parkway.

Smaller, service-oriented businesses are located in the "H," comprised of a 1.5-mile stretch of Livingston Avenue intersected by half-mile-long sections of Mount Pleasant Avenue to the north and Northfield Road to the south.

Now a jumble of strip malls, residential housing, individual stores and office buildings, the "H" is in the initial phase of a four-year facelift expected to be complete in 2007. New sidewalks of pavers, granite, bluestone and concrete have been installed on a half-mile of Livingston Avenue, along with benches and teardrop-shaped frosted glass streetlamps on 14-foot-high green iron posts. The project, financed through assessments on local businesses and grants from government

agencies, is expected to cost more than \$2.5 million, and will include new sidewalks and lighting throughout the "H."

The Livingston Business Improvement District has also obtained a \$54,000 grant to finance the drafting of a plan to connect the parking lots of many adjacent strip malls.

"Connecting the parking lots will enhance our sense of community by encouraging people to walk between stores and it will allow shoppers to patronize a number of stores without exiting and entering parking lots onto busy roads," Mayor Schneiderman said.

The facelift's centerpiece will be the construction of Town Center, a \$77 million retail, office and housing complex that is to replace a 1950's strip mall at the corner of Livingston and Mount Pleasant Avenues. The project, being built by three private developers, is due to start shortly and to be completed within two years.

The township has a total of 600 acres of parkland that is shared with the schools, which are all built in the middle of parks.

The largest park is the 65-acre Memorial Park off Livingston Avenue in the center of town. It includes the high school, the municipal complex, one of the township's two municipal pools, the library, a football field, four baseball diamonds, two basketball courts, six tennis courts, a lacrosse/soccer field and a fishing pond.