

# Living 'in town' grows in popularity

by Jane K. Dove

Ah, the joys of in-town living!

If you own a home in a Fairfield County hamlet that has a well-established central core of businesses, shops, restaurants and other amenities, all linked by well-maintained sidewalks and maybe even bike paths, you are part of a trend that has taken firm hold.

And depending on the town, you may even be able to walk to your commuter train station. New Canaan and Ridgefield are prime cases, where the demand for

homes close to the town's main thoroughfares has seen a significant upturn in the past decade.

## Blending Generations And Lifestyles

"In-town living today crosses many generations and lifestyles," says Carolyn Wheeler of Country Club Homes of Wilton. Ms. Wheeler, who co-owns the business with her brother, Walter Cromwell, Jr., has completed many building and renovation projects in New Canaan, winning a 2008 HOBBI award for Best In-Town Custom Home for a house on South Avenue.

"Older couples may want to downsize yet still have space for returning kids and grandkids," she says. "And young couples moving out of the city don't really want acres to take care of and are used to the convenience of stores, shops and restaurants that are easily accessible. They have growing families and want to be in a 'neighborhood' where their children can go outside, meet up with their friends and visit and play safely near their homes."

Laura Freed, a Realtor with William Pitt Sotheby's International Realty of Ridgefield, agrees.

"I think 'in-town' has always been desirable, but over the past several years, I think the mix of shops, restaurants and town events has grown fresher and friendlier, which appeals to young families," she says. "I think the Ridgefield Playhouse has also helped put us on the map as a destination. We also have a lot of specialty stores catering to younger families, and there's always something like a band concert happening in Ballard Park."

Ms. Freed believes in-town living also helps create community spirit, something that may be lacking for those who live on four acres on the outskirts of town.

"Ridgefield has a great energy about it," she says. "We have one of the prettiest main streets around, with sidewalks and many historic buildings. People love to walk, jog, push strollers and walk their dogs around town. On a nice day, people really turn out, and there is a real sense of a New England town in action."

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#### Builders Respond

Mr. Cromwell says home builders have been quick to recognize the growing trend. "We purchased a house on South Avenue in New Canaan after recognizing the trend, and were fortunate to quickly find a family who wanted to live there," he says. "So we built a custom home for them in 2008. Now, we are constantly looking for properties that are closer to town, with smaller yards that can accommodate a family home."

"It's not about how big the house can be, but how well designed the house is," he said. "For us, it's about blending harmoniously into the established look of the neighborhood. We keep the size and scale in tune with the surroundings, which usually include some historic homes."

Ms. Wheeler says she sees a lot of in-town building going on in Fairfield County communities. "For example, just on South Avenue, several houses are being redone or rebuilt. And Greenwich, obviously a much larger community, adopted the trend many years ago."

Ms. Wheeler says another of her firm's New Canaan projects reflects a slightly different approach. "We completed a renovation in Wilton on Graenest Ridge Road, only about a half mile from Wilton Center. Unlike New Canaan and Ridgefield, there aren't any sidewalks that connect the town to the surrounding streets. But that home provided the seclusion and privacy of a backcountry home only two minutes to the train station and downtown."

#### In-town Living Will Continue

Ms. Freed agrees that the future is bright. "In Ridgefield, in-town has always been considered 'blue chip,' and the builders and Realtors know the golden rule of location, location, location," she says. "There have been many successful tear-downs and re-models of in-town homes, and buyers feel safe about investing their money in a premium location."

Ms. Freed says she is excited about a new project she is working on with Heritage Home Construction. Called Village Park, it is a seven-home cul-de-sac subdivision



Village Park in Ridgefield is a new in-town subdivision by Reed Whipple and Heritage Home Construction.

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Built by Country Club Homes, an in-town home in New Canaan appeals to a variety of age groups and lifestyles.

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on Bryon Avenue, just a few blocks from Main Street on land formerly owned by St. Mary's Church.

"This is a quality project in a prime location, and the homes blend in with the historic character of the village," Ms. Freed says. "Buyers today are really savvy, and even with an in-town location, they want value."

Ms. Wheeler says she believes the new interest in in-town living reflects a pulling back from large, showplace houses and over-the-top spending, and also reflects a conscious effort to be "greener."

"The in-town home might not be a totally self-sustainable home, but emphasis now is on better insulation, windows, heating and air-conditioning, using geothermal options and green materials," she says. "In-town homes are generally going to be smaller and on smaller lots. So less energy is used, less water is used for landscaping and less gas to get around. All of these things benefit the environment, while maintaining and recapturing the old New England village feel."

Both women believe the in-town concept is healthy for real estate, local businesses and the families that have adopted the lifestyle.

"Many towns have plans to increase the number of sidewalks and bike paths," Ms. Wheeler says. "There is an emphasis on creating and maintaining green space in the downtown area. Of course, plenty of people still want that large backcountry home on plenty of acreage, but now it is no longer considered a negative to live in a beautifully designed, smaller in-town residence. It's become a matter of choice, and I think the trend is a healthy one."

Ms. Freed concurs. "In Ridgefield, there is no 'wrong side' of town," she says. "Regardless of whether you live in-town, out of town, north or south, we have a wonderfully diverse community, mixing small town values with a cosmopolitan outlook on life. The new trend to in-town living is yet another plus factor." ■



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