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LIVING IN | COLLINGSWOOD, N.J.

Where Walkable Encounters Affordable

By JILL P. CAPUZZO

SEAN OGDEN dropped off a bag of clothing at an AIDS charity thrift shop on Haddon Avenue, went down the street to buy a vacuum cleaner, then turned the corner to pick up a dozen crab cakes to serve to dinner guests. The errands were nothing extraordinary, except in one way: he was able to run them all on foot.

In recent years, this Camden County borough of nearly 15,000 residents has become sought after not only because of its walkable downtown and accessible public transportation, but also for an eclectic housing stock and a diverse population.

“I make a good income and I could live anywhere, but I choose not to,” said Mr. Ogden, a nurse anesthetist who moved to Collingswood from Philadelphia in 2005, after he and his partner, Michael Marotta, decided they wanted more space and suburban schools for Mr. Marotta’s two sons. “It’s very down-to-earth here. People do well for themselves but it’s unpretentious.” Seeking more of a yard, Mr. Ogden and Mr. Marotta are now looking to trade their large two-family home for a single-family, still in Collingswood.

As Robert Hanson, a broker for Long & Foster in Cherry Hill, put it: “You have people coming here from Philadelphia, North Jersey, even New York. Collingswood has its own identity of being trendy and that makes it very attractive, especially for people coming out of the city.”

Once largely blue collar, the 1.9-square-mile borough suffered during the 1980s and early ’90s from its proximity to Camden just to the west, and the exodus of businesses to malls. Mr. Ogden remembers Collingswood back then as “the place you would go to buy drugs.”

But the community has managed a self-reinvention — beginning in earnest in the late 1990s with the redevelopment of a run-down ’40s-era high-rise complex called Parkview Apartments. The town, an owner of the complex at its low point, arranged its sale to a private developer, recouped an \$8 million investment and made an extra \$4 million for community coffers.

“Parkview made it clear that we’d be very active to make something happen,” Mayor James Maley said. “Once the snowball started to roll down the hill, it kept going.”

Yet there was still the problem of rebuilding the downtown. Mayor Maley said that he and other officials “pushed on all fronts” to find new ventures — and that it was restaurants that responded. “They’ve become our anchors, with retail coming in around them,” he said.

Today, Haddon Avenue is home to more than a dozen restaurants and lots of shops.

Nowadays, the borough is seeking to capitalize on mass transit. In 2003, the New Jersey Department of Transportation's Smart Growth initiative — aimed at encouraging residential development along commuter corridors — named Collingswood a “transit village.” As such, it has received public and private financing for projects like the \$45 million LumberYard Condominiums, a mixed-use project near the Speedline, a rapid transit system connecting Camden County towns with Philadelphia. Phase 1 of that project — 41 apartments and 10 retail stores — is sold out; Phase 2 is being built.

Next would come a multistory residential and office complex, though that has met with mixed feelings. Scott Flynn is one of those who worry about overdevelopment. A 44-year-old carpenter, Mr. Flynn said he moved here eight years ago because he liked the mix of blue-collar and professional workers. “There’s a lot of reality in Collingswood that the blue-collar element brings to it,” he said. “This is not a Haddonfield or a Moorestown. You should be able to rub elbows with anybody here.”

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

Collingswood has a big mix of housing, from the brick row houses once home to Camden and Philadelphia factory workers, to grand residences facing the town park, where titans of industry once lived.

The 1940s row houses are popular among first-time buyers for their affordability and proximity to the train station, said Pat Ciervo, the owner of Main Street Realty. The large Victorians and colonials that face Knight Park or line the streets between the park and the White Horse Pike don’t come on the market very often, he added, but when they do, they are snatched up.

Some of the largest houses have been converted to two-family homes over the years, a trend that the borough has tried to reverse. Working with a local bank, the borough has offered low-interest financing for those seeking to convert duplexes back to single-families. Mayor Maley said that to date, 80 homes had been converted under this program.

Other desirable neighborhoods include the southern area of town, especially those streets facing Newton Lake, and, to the north, the stretch of South Park Drive facing Cooper River Park.

In addition to the Parkview Apartments, 20 percent of which are moderately priced housing, there are several other rental buildings in Collingswood, including the 109-unit Marina Park Apartments and the 217-unit RiverView Apartments near the Cooper River. There are also many rental units over the downtown stores. A borough-run property management task force conducts annual inspections of all multifamily units.

WHAT YOU’LL PAY

Like the housing stock, prices vary widely, which makes Collingswood more accessible and, with the economic downturn, more in demand than some neighboring towns.

“With a lot of homes being affordable,” said Alicia Weister, a broker with Prudential Fox & Roach of Haddonfield, “there’s still a lot of activity in this town, with a lot of first-time buyers looking to get in.” At the low end, a three-bedroom one-bath semidetached house is listed at \$124,900. Climbing up the scale, a large single-family near Newton Lake is listed for \$395,000. The highest-priced home on the market is a five-bedroom 1904 Victorian listed

at \$615,000.

Collingswood has an inventory of 72 homes. After nearly doubling over the previous five years, Mr. Ciervo said, prices have started to slip. The average sale price through mid-October was \$216,793, versus \$239,005 for the same period last year. Similarly houses have averaged 81 days on the market over the last nine months, versus 65 over the same period a year ago.

The LumberYard condos sell for \$350,000 to \$400,000, brokers say. Rentals run \$650 to \$1,000 a month.

THE COMMUTE

Collingswood is easily accessible to major highways. Most residents commute to nearby Philadelphia or to other New Jersey cities, but New York via the New Jersey Turnpike takes 90 minutes to 2 hours. New Jersey Transit's Riverline stops in Camden and can be taken to Trenton, for another NJ Transit line to the city. With the change, that trip takes about two and a quarter hours.

WHAT TO DO

People come from great distances to check out the restaurants, choosing from upscale Mexican, Caribbean, Asian fusion, and Italian, to name a few.

The Saturday morning farmers' market is another popular place to see and be seen. Operating from April through Thanksgiving, the market has 20 to 30 vendors selling organic produce, soaps, jams, meats and baked goods.

The community theater brings together more than 100 residents each year to put on a fall musical — this year the show is "Oliver," to be performed soon at the beautifully restored Scottish Rite Auditorium (another public-private project backed by the borough).

Situated in the center of town, the 60-acre Knight Park is the focus of much activity, from festivals to sports events to open-air movies in the summer. It's also a good place to walk your dog, as are Newton Lake Park and Cooper River Park. At Roberts Park Pool, Collingswood families can buy a summer season pass for \$200.

THE SCHOOLS

The five elementary schools have a total enrollment of 783 students. Collingswood Middle School has 355 students, and Collingswood High School has 852 students, including some from Woodlynne and Oaklyn. SAT averages last year were 483 in reading, 486 in math and 482 in writing, compared with 509, 491 and 489 statewide.

According to Superintendent Scott A. Oswald, a program for autistic students has been introduced at the elementary level, and a reading intervention program is in place at the middle and high schools. The high school's marching band has won state and national titles.

THE HISTORY

Much of the land now known as Collingswood was a farm in the Collings family in the 18th and 19th centuries. Once part of Haddon Township, Collingswood became its own entity in 1888. With two railroads and a trolley

running through town, the borough became one of the first prominent bedroom communities of Camden and Philadelphia at the turn of the last century.

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