

The New York Times

Real Estate

Sunday, May 23, 2004

If You're Thinking Of Living In:

Irvington, NY

Riverfront Vistas And Unassuming Charm

By ELSA BRENNER

AS Susan Freedman drives east on Main Street each morning on the way from her two-family home in Irvington toward her law office in White Plains, she checks the car's rear view mirror before turning onto Broadway and merging with the crush of commuter traffic. Leaving this verdant Westchester village behind for the day, she catches a reflection of the Hudson River flowing along the shoreline.

"Every time I see that view, I remind myself how lucky I am to live here," she said. "It's a beautiful sight."

One in a string of scenic villages going north from New York City along the Hudson, Irvington, which covers 2.8 square miles, offers its residents (6,631, according to the 2000 census) spectacular vistas but few of the amenities typically found in most suburbs near New York City.

Residents are willing to forfeit the convenience of a local supermarket, a neighborhood movie theater or even a municipal pool, real estate agents say. The closest supermarkets are in Dobbs Ferry, the next village to the south, or in Tarrytown, just to the north. For those in search of a multiplex or department stores, White Plains is about seven miles to the east off Interstate 287.

Small shops, restaurants and delis line Main Street, which dips down to the river from Broadway, a heavily traveled north-south road high above the water. And while empty parking spaces along the

commercial strip may be difficult to find, there are no meters.

Inside the stores, merchants like Danielle Diaz, who has owned Geordane's Food World, a neighborhood market, for 17 years, know most customers by their first names. Ms. Diaz accepts credit cards, but she also offers regulars monthly billing. "That way, their children can walk here with a shopping list in their hands, and I can fill their orders," she said. "I bill the family later."

As Carol Lettera, a sales agent for Houlihan/Lawrence, explained it, "What you're buying in Irvington is a way of life -- the waterfront, the parks, the good school system and the pretty little shops along Main Street."

Irvington's numerous selling points, along with the 40-minute hop on the Metro-North train into Manhattan, have attracted many professionals like Ms. Freedman, a former president of the local Chamber of Commerce, and her husband, Stephen Pareles, a chemist and adjunct professor at Iona College. The couple purchased their wood-frame "fixer upper" near Main Street for \$61,500 in 1979. Today, the income-producing house -- the couple live on the first floor and rent out the second -- might fetch eight times that much if it were on the market, Mrs. Lettera said.

But Ms. Freedman and Mr. Pareles, whose children are grown, said they had no plans to move. While Irvington is a fine place to raise children, they explained, empty-nesters also appreciate

the parks and friendly neighborhoods. Irvington's unpretentious charms have lured a variety of residents over the years -- with more than a few professionals, and celebrities as well. In the 1940's, Mike Todd, the theater impresario, lived here with the actress Joan Blondell. Stan Getz, the tenor saxophone player, was also a village resident, and his former wife Monica Getz, founder of the Coalition for Family Justice, still occupies their estate on about 10 acres. Other well-known names associated with Irvington include Julius LaRosa, the singer; Bob James, the jazz musician; the actors Debra Winger and her husband Arliss Howard; and the choreographer Peter Martins.

THE village's namesake is Washington Irving, the author of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," who resided in the area during the mid-1800's. Sunnyside, the writer's estate, is in Tarrytown, not far past the border with Irvington.

Another notable resident was Louis Comfort Tiffany. His stained-glass artistry can be seen in the Irvington Town Hall and in other buildings in the area. In 1912, he donated pale blue and green windows to the Irvington Presbyterian Church, and in the local library, his amber lamps are suspended from the bookshelves.

Living in Irvington can come at a high cost. The median price of a single-family home for sales that closed in the first quarter of this year was \$972,500 -- 69 percent higher than the median for



the county, \$574,900, reported Bernice Gottlieb, the owner of Hudson Shores Realtors on Main Street. Two-family homes, like a renovated 2,500-square-foot Victorian that is currently on the market, often sell for the high \$700,000's or less, since these are often on small lots with limited river views, she said.

"Some of the houses are pricey, but there are alternatives," she observed. Co-ops (there are more than 400 units) start in the low \$100,000's, and condos (some 300 units) begin around \$400,000. One-bedroom apartments rent for \$1,100 and up.

At the other end of the spectrum, Mrs. Gottlieb said, riverfront mansions on large pieces of land can sell for \$5 million or more.

For residents choosing to live closer to the Hudson, there is another factor to consider: the wail, night and day, of trains passing through on the tracks next to the river. Some find it a "soothing, somewhat reassuring" sound, Mrs. Gottlieb said; others consider it a detraction.

The first known residents were the Weckquaesqueek Indians, whose name is said to mean "place of the bark kettle," a cooking vessel actually made of bark and made waterproof by applying pitch. (A symbol of the kettle is part of the town seal of Greenburgh, the township in which the village of Irvington is situated.) AS Dutch settlers made their way up the Hudson in the early 1600's, they displaced the Indians living along its banks. By the mid-1600's, the area was being farmed by British tenants on the manor owned by Frederick Philipse, who came to the region in 1647 with Peter Stuyvesant.

In the 19th century, the area that was incorporated as the village of Irvington in 1872 became a favorite summer spot for New York City moguls like Jay Gould, the financier, and Cyrus Field, the promoter of the first Atlantic cable. In 1860, Paul Armour, a banker, built the Victorian-style Octagon House on West Clinton Avenue, which continues to be used as a private residence. Nevis Laborato-

ries, a high-energy physics laboratory of Columbia University, today occupies a 60-acre estate built by Alexander Hamilton's son James. The du Pont family of Delaware later acquired the estate and donated it to Columbia in 1934.

The 430-seat Irvington Town Hall Theater, which was built in 1902 and patterned after the Ford Theater in Washington, is still in use. In the early years of the 20th century, it served many of the wealthy families who spent summers and weekends along the Hudson. According to Pamela Alexandra Rapp, the theater's current manager, "It was where everything in town took place, including balls, cotillions and other functions."

Restored and now on the National Register of Historic Places, the theater, which is owned by the village, is used these days for similar functions -- performances, meetings and other community events.

The Old Croton Aqueduct was built in the 1840's to carry fresh water from the Croton Reservoir. A trailway following the aqueduct route is now owned and managed by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the pathway is a favorite of hikers.

While Irvington remains rich in history, preserving it has not been an easy task, said Stephen McCabe, the village administrator. "Managing growth to preserve the village's existing character and ambience is something we continue to grapple with," he said. Toward that end, the village has adopted a new master plan and is enacting local laws to tighten zoning, control development, limit McMansions and preserve open space, Mr. McCabe said. It is also developing a master plan for parks and recreation.

There are four public schools in the village: Dows Lane Elementary School for kindergarten through third grade; Main Street School for Grades 4 and 5; Irvington Middle School, Grades 6 to 8; and Irvington High School.

The Irvington School District includes not only the village, but also a portion of

southern Tarrytown and part of the unincorporated areas of Greenburgh. It encompasses a 4.5-square-mile area and serves close to 2,000 students.

At Irvington High School, which shares a sprawling campus with the middle school, students taking the SAT reasoning tests this year averaged 590 on the verbal section and 610 on the math section, according to Scott Mosenthal, the principal. Last year, statewide average scores were 496 and 510, respectively.

Of the 124 students expected to graduate this spring, 88 percent are planning to attend four-year colleges, 4 percent have chosen two-year colleges and the rest are undecided, Dr. Mosenthal said.

The middle and high school campus has been recently renovated, Dr. Mosenthal added. A new library, theater, 800-seat gymnasium, fitness center, cafeteria and science wing were financed with \$49 million in bonds.

At the Main Street School, 87 percent of the fourth graders taking the language arts test last year met or exceeded state standards; on the math tests, 84 percent met or exceeded standards, the state Department of Education reported.

Because of such high performance, the school system receives strong support from many parents. John E. Gilroy, a systems manager for Verizon and a single father with two children in the Irvington schools, is such an advocate. "When I go to work, I know the kids are O.K., and that means everything to me," said Mr. Gilroy, who owns a two-bedroom co-op here. "At school, the curriculum is tailored for their individual learning styles. And after school, I know they're looked after too, because living in Irvington is like having one big extended family. It's like when I grew up -- the same kind of feeling. People watch out for each other here."

