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LIVING IN | WEST ORANGE, N.J.

Harder to Get to, Easier to Pay For

By **DAVE CALDWELL**

LIKE many New Yorkers seeking to migrate to the suburbs to raise a family, Josh and Elizabeth Haynes Leventhal first started looking for houses in Montclair, Maplewood and South Orange, N.J., mainly because those were places they'd heard about while living in TriBeCa. The neighboring town of West Orange was not on their shopping list.

Though West Orange is less than 20 miles from [New York City](#), it is not on the lists of many home buyers to begin with, agents say, because it does not have a train station that provides direct service to Pennsylvania Station — as Montclair, Maplewood and South Orange do. Nor does it have a small village of shops — to push a baby stroller, for instance, while running Saturday morning errands.

What West Orange does have, the Leventhals found, was a lot more open space and an old-fashioned charm. They and their year-old daughter, Madeline, are now living in a six-bedroom Victorian built in 1865 in Llewellyn Park, a gated community, for which they paid \$1.375 million in June.

While Mr. Leventhal has continued working as a Wall Street trader, Ms. Haynes Leventhal has completed a contemporary novel about Wall Street titled "Trading." Together, they have discovered some of the old-fashioned establishments that endure in West Orange, like the Eagle Rock Diner, where the waitresses call all three of them "Honey."

"You feel like there's something down-to-earth and real here," Ms. Haynes Leventhal said.

There is a bowling alley next to the diner and a venerable local steakhouse, Pal's Cabin, just down the street. There are six [golf](#) courses, the sweeping Eagle Rock and South Mountain reservations, a zoo, an arena with two skating rinks and a shopping center with a multiscreen movie theater and a supermarket.

According to census estimates, West Orange's population last year was 42,906. Montclair, its neighbor, tallied up at 37,052. The difference is that West Orange's population is spread out over 12.1 square miles, about twice the area of Montclair.

"Each section of town has its own little vibe to it," said Heather De Barros, who with her husband, Manny, traded their first home in West Orange 10 months ago for a four-bedroom colonial in the Eagle Crest neighborhood, paying \$740,000.

They are apparently not alone. "We have a lot of people staying within the community," said Ronald De Piro, the managing broker for Weichert Realtors' West Orange office.

Because a commuter must take a bus to New York from a park-and-ride garage, or a jitney to one of three

stations on [New Jersey Transit's](#) Midtown Direct train line, West Orange is generally perceived as somewhat out of the way. But to many residents, that is not necessarily a bad thing.

"You can buy a house, usually, for less than you could in a town on a train line," said Justin Wrobel, the president of Exit Garden State Realty, whose offices are in West Orange.

The leafy Upper Gregory neighborhood in West Orange looks like neighborhoods in nearby South Orange or Maplewood. But the price of a home in West Orange would be about \$75,000 less than a similar house in South Orange or Maplewood, Mr. Wrobel said.

Business has been slow during the economic downturn, he added, though houses will sell quickly if they are not overpriced.

Sam Joseph, an agent for Re/Max Village Square who sells in Llewellyn Park, says he has had a "pretty decent year." Specifying West Orange's attraction, he said, "People want the proximity of New York without the headaches."

WHAT YOU'LL FIND

Main Street, an urbanized clump of tightly packed stores and wood-frame houses, is the backbone of downtown West Orange. At about the midpoint of Main is Glenmont, the estate that [Thomas A. Edison](#) and his young second wife, Mina, bought in 1886. Edison then built a large laboratory nearby.

This stretch of Main Street, up to the looming Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic church at Eagle Rock Avenue, is the most walkable part of town and includes the town hall and establishments like Gaffer's Pub and the Rock Cellar. This part of Main Street plays host to the enormously popular annual St. Patrick's Day parade.

West Orange is bisected by Interstate 280, which runs east and west, with Eagle Rock Reservation to the northeast and a portion of the sprawling South Mountain Reservation to the south. Essex Green Shopping Center is off I-280, near the center of the township, and Francis A. Byrne Municipal Golf Course is down Mount Pleasant Avenue.

The quieter Upper Gregory and St. Cloud neighborhoods are off Northfield Avenue, which leads to [Richard J. Codey](#) (formerly South Mountain) Arena, Turtle Back Zoo and the big park-and-ride garage.

Pleasantdale, a village on Pleasant Valley Way, is home to an Orthodox Jewish community and has its own Judaica store.

According to statistics compiled by the [New Jersey](#) State Police, crime dropped to 26.2 incidences per 1,000 population in 2006, from 44.5 incidences per 1,000 population in 1998. Violent crimes in the same period dropped to 83 per 1,000, from 123.

"You might hear a complaint or two about property taxes," said John F. McKeon, who grew up in West Orange and has been its part-time mayor for 10 years, "but you won't hear anybody say they're not comfortable living here."

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

There were 335 houses listed for sale earlier this month on www.gsmls.com, the Garden State Multiple Listing Service's Web site. The median price was \$400,000. Prices ranged from \$150,000, for a renovated one-bedroom condominium, to \$4.25 million, for a six-bedroom colonial to be built in Llewellyn Park.

More than half the houses are priced at \$300,000 to \$500,000. A three-bedroom 1960 split-level was listed at \$405,000, with a \$15,000 credit for renovation offered. The 2007 tax bill on the house, which has three full baths and a finished basement, was \$11,538.

Judging by West Essex Board of Realtors numbers, the downturn has had an effect on the West Orange market: 423 houses sold here from Jan. 1 to Nov. 30, whereas in all of 2007, 540 houses sold. The average sale price was \$418,334, and the average length of time on the market was 84 days. Last year the average price was \$454,238, and the average time on market was 76 days.

WHAT TO DO

For \$40, Essex County residents can buy an annual identification card that lets them play each round of golf at the Francis Byrne course for \$21 — a \$20 discount. Ice skating at Codey Arena, run by the county, is \$6 for adults, \$4 for children and residents over 65, and \$4 to rent a pair of skates. An annual family pass to the community pool is \$260.

The shopping districts of Montclair, South Orange and Maplewood are nearby, as are the malls in Short Hills and Livingston. "The nice thing about being here," Ms. Haynes Leventhal said, "is that we have a lot of friends in the surrounding towns, and we're sort of equidistant between them."

THE SCHOOLS

There are seven elementary schools for kindergarten through fifth grade; three middle schools (Edison for sixth grade and Roosevelt and Jefferson for seventh and eighth grades), and West Orange High School.

Enrollments at the seven elementary schools range from 321 to 503. At Gregory School, the largest, average class size in the academic year ending in 2007 was 16, versus 19.1 statewide. Average class size for fifth-graders was 18.2, versus 21.1 statewide.

About 2,000 students in Grades 9 through 12 are enrolled at West Orange High School. SAT averages for the year ending in 2007 were 486 in math, 472 in reading and 468 in writing, versus 509, 491 and 489 statewide. The class of 2007 had a 95.1 percent graduation rate, versus 92.3 percent statewide.

THE COMMUTE

Essex County operates a large park-and-ride garage next to Codey Arena. Community Coach Inc. runs 18 express buses to the Port Authority Bus Terminal on weekday mornings and 12 express buses during the evening rush hour. The trip takes 40 to 45 minutes. A 10-trip pass is \$64.35, and garage parking is \$535 a year.

West Orange also operates three free jitney lines to South Orange, Orange and Mountain stations on New Jersey Transit's Midtown Direct line. There are four morning jitney rides from the St. Cloud neighborhood, and six from South Orange at night. A monthly pass from South Orange to Penn Station is \$154.

THE HISTORY

Thomas Edison was 84 upon his death in 1931. His widow married her childhood sweetheart, Edward Everett Hughes. When he in turn died, in 1940, she went back to using the surname Edison. She died in 1947 and is buried next to Edison at Glenmont, which is now a national historic site.

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