

Gold in Them Thar North Hills

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The Gold Coast keeps getting more golden.

Long Island's North Hills found a place among the top 10 wealthiest communities in the nation, according to data compiled yesterday by The Associated Press.

Using data from the 2000 Census, the village of 4,300 placed eighth on the list of wealthiest communities, with an average per capita income of \$100,093 - the only community in New York to make the list.

"This is a great community, full of warm people, most of whom are professionals," said its longtime mayor, John M. Lentini.

North Hills has long been at the heart of Long Island's Gold Coast, housing such huge wooded estates as that of William S. Paley, the founder and former chairman of CBS, former New York Mets owner Joan Whitney Payson and J. Peter Grace, the third-generation president of the W.R. Grace shipping lines.

For years, Long Island was ranked first in the country in terms of per capita wealth, said Thomas Conoscenti, an associate senior economist at the Center for Regional Policy Studies at SUNY Stony Brook. But a decrease in median income during the past decade saw the Nassau-Suffolk area drop to second, behind San Jose, Calif., in terms of median household income, according to a study by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at SUNY Albany. It was followed by the Washington, D.C., area.

The center ranks areas based on a variety of criteria, ranging from per capita income to median income to the percent of people below the poverty level.

"We have a highly educated labor force - the average person on Long Island probably has a college degree - we're close to New York City, and we're an entrepreneurial kind of island," Conoscenti said. Unlike the new wealth of San Jose's dot-com millionaires, Conoscenti said Long Island's gentry goes back generations. "We still have a lot of old money on Long Island that's tied to New York City and the old economic base," he said.

Thirty years ago, there were only about 300 residents in the village of North Hills. That population has multiplied nearly 15 times and is still growing. The big estates have been carved into gated communities, condominiums and homeowner associations, and it is difficult to find any residence under \$1 million.

"There are gated communities such as Grace Wood and Stone Hill, which are about 5 years old and people paid between \$700,000 and \$1 million for their homes there," said Janet Andreoni, manager of Coldwell Banker Sammis real estate in adjacent Manhasset. "Those same houses are now selling for between \$1.5 and \$2.5 million."

And while census data indicates that the average age of a resident in the village is 53.8 years and that only about 15 percent of the population is under 18, Andreoni said that has been changing in the past couple of years. "More and more younger families are buying into this community, especially because of the two great school districts that serve it - Manhasset and Herricks," she said.

Lentini, who has been mayor for 11 years, calls his village "a success story unrivaled in New York State."

Indeed, 13 years ago a Roosevelt University urbanologist's study ranked North Hills as the third richest suburb in New York State, behind two other Long Island areas, Hewlett-Woodsburch and Sands Point.

North Hills resident Sheldon Newman, a retired executive, said he finds it "hard to believe that this community is wealthier than many of those east of us, such as Brookville and Old Westbury."

But Lentini believes it.

"We believe our acquisition of the Deepdale Country Club will be the crown jewel of our municipality and bring us to a new level of North Shore Gold Coast affluence, perhaps bringing us to number 1," Lentini said.

Livin' Large

According to The Associated Press, the 10 wealthiest U.S. communities, based on census data and average per capita incomes are:

Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. \$113,132
Atherton, Calif. \$112,408
Palm Beach, Fla. \$109,219
Bloomfield Hills, Mich. \$104,920
Belle Meade, Tenn. \$104,908
Woodside, Calif. \$104,667
Indian River Shores, Fla. \$102,511
North Hills, N.Y. \$100,093
Cherry Hills Village, Colo. \$99,996
Portola Valley, Calif. \$99,621

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