

Here, Even Gatsby Would Be Ordinary

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By BRUCE LAMBERT

NORTH HILLS, N.Y., June 5 - Driving by, it is easy to miss this small, secluded community on the North Shore of Long Island. There is no real center or downtown. Most of its residents are hidden in costly enclaves of town houses - one is actually called The Enclave - and million-dollar homes on private cul-de-sacs. Gates, guardhouses and private-road signs discourage the uninvited.

But now the village is getting nationwide attention for its new ranking as the richest community in the Northeast, with an average per capita income of \$100,093 a year, according to figures reported Tuesday by the Census Bureau. North Hills was the only spot in the Northeast to earn a place on the list of the nation's 10 wealthiest communities, ranking No. 8, alongside some better known places like Palm Beach, Fla.

No one here seems surprised. "There's a lot of wealth in this community," said Mayor John M. Lentini. "It's such a blue chip area. I don't know of any area of Long Island that has this kind of concentration of wealth. There's no place like this." Actually, the village's current very-rich status is a bit of a comedown from its origins - it was incorporated in 1929 - as the domain of a

few super-wealthy families. For decades, much of North Hills was occupied by the estates and horse farms of the likes of the Whitneys, the Paleys and the Graces. "They were the very wealthy icons of the Gold Coast," the mayor said.

Modern North Hills began taking shape in the 1970's, when the old estates began to break up and be redeveloped. Despite zoning restrictions that allow only two houses per acre, the population has flourished - from 200 or 300 in the 70's to about 4,500 today.

"We've had a phenomenal growth pattern that to my way of thinking is unrivaled," Mayor Lentini said.

Why did the well-to-do flock to North Hills? Mayor Lentini, a real estate manager, has a one-word answer: "Location."

The western end of the village is only a mile from the Queens border, yet its terrain is a bucolic respite of gently rolling hills with plenty of trees. The transportation is hard to beat: The village straddles the Long Island Expressway and the

Northern State Parkway, and the Long Island Rail Road provides an under-30-minute commute to Manhattan.

Some older residents are drawn to the condominium life, and some are snowbirds who spend winters in the Sun Belt. Other residents work in the financial industry or as doctors, lawyers or executives. "There are even sports professionals here," said Tara Acciardi, who has lived in the community two months. "They practice at Hofstra, and Darryl Strawberry used to live here."

There is no reason why North Hills cannot rise to first place nationally, Mayor Lentini said, especially if he succeeds in his plan to buy the Deepdale Golf Course and open it to residents only.

"That would make North Hills that much more desirable, which would make the properties that much more valuable, which will bring in that many more affluent people," he said. "It can only get better."

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