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Article: Long Island; Plush Homes Along Superhighways

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There's a distant hum audible to a first-time visitor standing outside the town house of Jana and David Spiess in North Hills. But the Spiesses don't hear it. "I've lived here for a month, and I've never thought to myself 'I hear the highway,'" David Spiess, 59, said.

That must be a relief, since Mr. Spiess lives in a gated community of million-dollar attached town houses bordering two of Long Island's major roadways: the Long Island Expressway and the Northern State Parkway.

From the kitchen of the Spiess home -- a spacious high-ceilinged brick two-story with four bedrooms, four bathrooms, columns in the living room and chandeliers hanging from nearly every space -- a small section of Northern State Parkway is visible through bare winter trees.

The village of North Hills had the highest per capita income in the Northeast in 2002, according to United States census. But despite the draws of such an exclusive neighborhood -- good schools, a trip of only 25 miles to Manhattan, expensive shops and luxury housing -- it still seems surprising that people would pay more than \$1 million to live smack on the Long Island Expressway South Service Road.

"It's the cachet of being in the North Hills community," said Lee Koppelman, executive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board. "It's not that they're opting to be on the L.I.E. service road; it's that if they want to be in that community, this is the only choice they have."

With housing prices continuing to soar -- the median price for a house in Nassau County in December 2004 was \$450,000 -- profit-minded developers and builders build homes, not office buildings or commercial strips, wherever they can.

As a result, million-dollar luxury homes and upscale assisted-living buildings are popping up along major roadways and on former industrial properties that have been rezoned.

"The demand for residential is so high, and you can get really good numbers for condos and town houses," said Robert Wieboldt, executive vice president of the Long Island Builders Institute. "If you can get the density, it's a higher return and a better use of the property."

The Spiesses moved to their new home from Searingtown, where they had lived for 20 years and raised their two daughters. In the midst of renovating that house in 2002, Mrs. Spiess's interior decorator called and told her about the new Chatham town houses.

"I said, 'I don't want to live between two major parkways, and I don't want an attached house,'" Mrs. Spiess said, echoing the first reactions of many prospective buyers.

But in two years, the prices of the town houses kept going up and the couple had not seen another home they liked. It took one visit to the development to sell the Spiesses on Chatham. "I fell in love with the space," Mrs. Spiess said. "We felt that this home had everything we wanted for our later years."

The master bedroom is on the first floor, as is the laundry. The large living room and dining room -- which have ceilings that extend to the top of the house -- are right for entertaining, Mrs. Spiess said. She said the 3,400-square-foot home with a 1,500-square-foot basement was about twice the size of the home they sold.

"Before you come in to see it, you would think you wouldn't want to live sandwiched between the Northern State Parkway and the L.I.E.," said Chad Gessin, a spokesman for Chatham at North Hills. "But many people think it's a great location. You're five minutes from the Americana Manhasset," a high-end shopping destination. "You can be on the L.I.E. going east in 30 seconds," he added. "You can go west in two minutes."

The Spiesses moved in last month and couldn't be happier, they say.

"When we looked at the model, we went inside, closed the door and stood quietly to see if we could hear the traffic," Mr. Spiess said. "We couldn't hear anything."

Inside their house, sitting still without talking, a reporter could hear only silence. Looking out a corner of the kitchen window toward the south, cars whizzed by noiselessly on the Northern State Parkway.

The trend to build along major roadways and in former industrial spaces has been picking up steam as open space initiatives try to preserve land in Suffolk County and as available land disappears in Nassau County.

The developer Roger Tilles has reportedly agreed to sell the "pumpkin farm," a 53-acre parcel of land bordering the L.I.E. and Old Whitman Road in Huntington, to the Holiday Organization, a residential developer. The property was rezoned in 1994 to industrial space for the office building that Mr. Tilles once planned to build there.

Though Holiday has not yet applied to the Town of Huntington, the developer is expected to request residential zoning to build a senior housing development with both luxury and affordable units on the site, said the Huntington town supervisor, Frank Petrone. "It may be looked at as desirable, since it's senior and it doesn't bring additional population to the school district, which is already overcrowded," Mr. Petrone said.

Holiday has been building homes along the L.I.E. for the last five years, including a community of 330 luxury condominiums and single-family homes in a development along the expressway service road in Plainview. Homes in that development, the Hamlet on Old Oyster Bay, ranged from \$300,000 for a two-bedroom condo to \$800,000 for a single-family home when they sold out in three weeks in 2000, according to a Holiday spokesman, Ron Bloomfield.

The company is currently planning another such development, Hamlet Estates, on busy Jericho Turnpike in Jericho.

Housing for the aging and the elderly is also appearing along major roadways. A fifth Bristol assisted living building -- one of four others on the Island is next door to Chatham at North Hills -- is going up on 4.8 acres along Sunrise Highway on Nassau's south shore.

Some towns approve zoning changes from commercial to residential on land along major roads specifically for higher density or assisted living facilities. "The Town of Brookhaven in Suffolk is trying to put all senior housing and multifamily residences along major highways," said Mr. Wieboldt of the Builders Institute.

In Nassau, a mixed-income rental community that includes some senior housing is to be built on part of the 173-acre site of the former Roosevelt Raceway in Westbury, visible from the Meadowbrook Parkway.

Back in North Hills, outside the Spiesses' front door, the four-story Bristol assisted living building next door to Chatham can be seen above the town houses. The windowed brick building is not unattractive, but its appearance seems almost urban.

"It's a pretty building; it didn't bother me at all," Mrs. Spiess said. "You can live in a expensive apartment in Manhattan and all you'll see are other buildings."