

Changes to Cheer About. Really.



Timothy Ivy for The New York Times

Tradition, Transition A condo going up in Rahway, whose renovated train station links to both the Northeast Corridor and the Jersey Shore.

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Published: May 6, 2007

IF you ask most people what comes to mind when they hear the word “Rahway,” the first answer is likely to be the state prison. A second response might have something to do with Rahway’s role as a major stop on the [New Jersey Transit](#) lines leading into [New York City](#).

Multimedia



Rahway, N.J.

The first association is based on a misnomer, residents are quick to point out. To begin with, Rahway State Prison was renamed East Jersey State Prison 19 years ago. Then there is the fact that the prison is actually in Woodbridge, not Rahway. An arrangement made long ago between the Rahway post office and prison officials has trapped this Union County city in an embrace it has had a hard time loosening.

The second perception, on the other hand, is one that Rahway would like to capitalize on, and that opportunity might be close at hand. Having established a town center around a renovated train station and new plaza, officials are anticipating the completion of 1,500 housing units geared toward professionals. This has led to predictions of another kind for working-class Rahway.

“It’ll be yuppie town,” said Ted Gielen, owner of the Rahway Grill. “It’ll be just like Hoboken.”

Mr. Gielen, who hung in when many other downtown businesses fled for the malls, is eager to see the empty shops along Cherry Street come back to life. So is Joe Cimilluca, a broker with the Able Agency Real Estate Company, which also stayed in Rahway when other agencies left.

“There’s a lot of buzz about what’s happening downtown,” Mr. Cimilluca said. “There’s no question that this thing is going to turn full circle, but it’s going to take time. Just like it took 15 to 20 years to deplete itself, it’s going to take that long for Rahway to build itself back up again.”

Many people attribute the turnaround to the mayor, James Kennedy, a nearly lifelong resident who has eaten, slept and breathed Rahway since his election in 1990. When other businesses fled Main Street and headed to the malls during the 1970s, his downtown jewelry store stayed put. When a house in the city’s historic district came on the market in 1983, he and his wife, Lori, grabbed it. (Mr. Kennedy has renovated nine other older buildings in town, including one that now houses the much acclaimed David Drake restaurant.)

More important, when it came time to entice investors to Rahway, the mayor’s connections to Trenton helped. Mr. Kennedy counts as one of his best friends former Gov. [James E. McGreevey](#). Since 1999, more than \$100 million in public and private money has been invested in Rahway. In the beginning, Mr. Kennedy admits, the place was a tough sell.

“People were buying here based on good values,” he said, “but they were skeptical, because of the reputation of the town, because of the prison. Once the town center is done, I think that stigma will start to evaporate very quickly.”

Linda Landmesser, a broker with Countrywide Home Loans and a 40-year resident, put it this way: “Rahway used to be a very quaint old town. To see it coming back like it is, that’s very hopeful to me.”

Ms. Landmesser, who remembers meeting friends to shop in the stores downtown and eat in the luncheonette, described the construction cranes and diverted traffic as a bearable price to pay, considering what they portend for the city's health.

Projects range from the already completed town houses and apartments on the banks of the Rahway River to a 16-story hotel and luxury condominium being built opposite the train station.

What You'll Find

Rahway's three major arteries divide its neighborhoods into distinct pockets. Through the northern tier there is St. Georges Avenue, a stretch of restaurants, car dealers and shops that serve surrounding middle-class neighborhoods. Through the center of town run the train tracks, around which much of the development is taking place. And through the south runs a somewhat shabby stretch of Route 1, cutting off the southernmost pockets, some of which have not yet benefited from the residual effects of revitalization.

Besides the much anticipated development downtown, Rahway has a solid stock of single-family homes and has long attracted middle- and working-class families from New York and North Jersey seeking good value. So far, brokers say, they have not seen a big influx of upscale city dwellers suddenly discovering this four-square-mile city of 26,500.

"It's always been a good commuter town," said Freddy Rivera, an agent at ERA Village Green Realty in Clark. "Especially after 9/11, you had New Yorkers who wanted to get out of the city but didn't want to move all the way out into the suburbs, so a lot of them came to Rahway."

The simplicity of access to New York City should not be underestimated as an asset of this city 20 miles away. The 40- to 50-minute direct train ride is a boon for commuters, or anyone who wants to catch a Broadway show or sporting event.

Martha and John Echevarria bought a split-level ranch here for \$170,000 in 1999, after having lived in [Brooklyn](#). Mrs. Echevarria said the decision to leave Brighton Beach was made for them by the bullet hole they found in their car one day. It had been parked outside their apartment building. They both commute into New York to work, as does Mrs. Echevarria's 72-year-old mother, Blanca Nuñez, who lives with them.

“It was really important to me that there was transportation available that she could take into work,” said Mrs. Echevarria, an admitting officer at the Hospital for Special Surgery in [Manhattan](#). “People ask me do I mind the commute. I tell them I love it here. It’s so peaceful and quiet. It’s like a vacation.”

What You’ll Pay

Because much of the work downtown is still in progress, real estate remains somewhat underpriced compared with neighboring Clark or Woodbridge. But the numbers are expected to creep up as the new developments are completed.

“I tell my clients to look at Rahway as a stock,” Mr. Cimilluca said. “The company’s on the rise, it’s done a lot of great things, but it hasn’t hit that top plateau yet. Once it does, you’re not going to be able to afford it.”

There are 189 houses on the market. Among the most popular neighborhoods is Inman Heights, in the northeast, where a typical split level, Cape Cod or smaller colonial, with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, lists in the low to middle \$300,000s. Similar houses in the desirable Milton Lake Park are a little higher; a three-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath ranch with lake views, for instance, is listed at \$399,000.

The older Victorian or colonial-style houses in the historic district, closer to downtown, don’t come on the market very often, but when they do, depending on condition, they can top \$500,000. The highest-priced older home now on the market here is a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath colonial at the end of West Lake Drive, listed at \$684,500.

On the new-housing front, just south of City Hall (which is moving elsewhere to make room for more new housing), the River Walk development on Essex Street has 87 town houses, priced from \$440,000 to \$600,000. The 222 condominiums in Skyview, the 16-story hotel/residential building expected to open next May, will list from \$230,000 to \$480,000, according to a Skyview sales representative.

What to Do

The heart of the still-fledgling arts district in Rahway is the Union County Arts Center, housed in the restored 1928 Rahway Theater building. More renovations will keep the site closed until next year, but in the meantime the arts center is holding performances at the high school and senior citizen center.

Milton Lake, with its marked paths, is a popular destination for fishermen and walkers. The city's historic society headquarters, at the Merchant and Drovers Historic Tavern Museum, draws many visitors with events like the Halloween graveyard ghost tour.

The Commute

Rahway is where New Jersey Transit's Northeast Corridor and North Jersey Shore lines converge. That makes it one of the busiest stations in [New Jersey](#), providing service not only on the New York-to-Philadelphia route, but also to the Jersey Shore towns. Bus service is available, too, from a depot on St. Georges Avenue, with a commute a little longer than the train: just under one hour. The Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike are also easily accessible.

The Schools

Rahway has four neighborhood elementary schools, teaching kindergarten through Grade 5: Grover Cleveland, Franklin, Madison and Roosevelt. Grades 6 through 8 are taught at Rahway Middle School, Grades 9 through 12 at Rahway High School. Despite illustrious alumni like the astronomer Carl Sagan, the high school has in recent years been troubled by disciplinary problems and low test scores. Rahway's average math SAT score in the academic year ending in 2006 was 449, versus the state average of 516. The verbal average that year was 438, versus the state average of 492.

The high school's performing and fine arts program, on the other hand, has consistently won praise.

There are several Catholic elementary schools in neighboring communities, including St. John the Apostle in Clark, and St. John Vianney in Colonia. Options for teenagers include Roselle and Union Catholic High Schools.

The History

Once home to the Lenape Indians, the town derived its name from a local tribal chief. Settled by Europeans in 1664 as part of the Elizabethtown Tract purchase, Rahway was not incorporated until 1858. Its central location made it an important stop for stagecoaches, boats on the Rahway River and, later, trains. It was also a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The city at one time served as a big home to manufacturing, including the Wheatena cereal and Regina Music Box companies. Today, only Merck & Company pharmaceuticals remains, with 4,500 employees.

Going Forward

Reviving the downtown is good news for merchants and residents eager to see real estate values increase, though some worry that it could create a class fissure between old-timers and new arrivals.

Many are viewing the transformation with a mix of anticipation and anxiety. Noting a “certain mind-set” among longtimers, Mr. Cimilluca, the broker from Able Agency, said, “Nobody likes change, even good change, but once it’s built, and people are there, they’ll be more receptive.”