

2 Lakes, the Shore and a Train to the City



Mary DiBiase Blach for The New York Times

WALK TO WORSHIP A view of Main Street, where most of Matawan's oldest buildings can be found. The township has wide appeal, partly because of its direct transport link to New York City.

By JILL P. CAPUZZO

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NOT long after moving to [Matawan](#), Elizabeth Renner's children, Nicholas and Maria, found their local park in bad shape and decided to do something about it. With playmates, they circulated a petition, ran a lemonade stand and raised \$169, which they handed over at a Borough Council meeting, urging the officials in attendance to fix the park.

Multimedia



[Slide Show](#)

[Living in Matawan](#)



On the Market



Map

The council members returned the money, and within a year had installed new equipment. The lesson the children took from the experience, their mother said, in many ways defines Matawan.

“They found out in a small town, your voice can be heard,” said Mrs. Renner, describing the close-knit nature of the town she moved to in 2004, after marrying Steve Renner, who grew up in this Monmouth County borough.

Another transplant, Ken Colón, was similarly impressed by the sense of community he found last fall after he and his fiancée, Rachel Bragg, bought a house.

“It was a culture shock to him,” said Ms. Bragg of Mr. Colón, who moved to town from Bloomfield in Essex County. “When he walked into town to talk about taxes and utilities and people were saying, ‘Hi,’ he didn’t even realize they were talking to him.”

Matawan appeals to a wide variety of residents, partly because of an excellent transportation network but also for its wealth of natural resources, including two lakes and the Matawan Creek. The latter became part of [New Jersey](#) lore in 1916 after a shark made its way inland and killed a young boy swimming in the creek, as well as a would-be rescuer.

“I’d say it’s pretty much divided between those who are here because of its proximity to the city and the shore, and the group that’s been here since Columbus,” said

William Garofalo, the borough administrator, describing the old-timers among the 8,900 or so residents as “the bedrock of Matawan.”

A clan in that camp, Beth Hopkins’s family, has lived here for 70 years. Ms. Hopkins’s father, Stockton Hopkins, was borough historian for many years, and she a member of the Matawan Historical Society, based in the 1723 [Burrowes Mansion](#), which bears bullet holes said to date to the Revolution.

The still rather old-fashioned downtown that adjoins the Matawan-Aberdeen train station is an area of contention because of commuter traffic to and from the station, the main link to New York for several towns in the region. But the mayor, Paul Buccellato, emphasizes that the downtown is a place in transition.

Seven years ago, Matawan was named a [New Jersey Transit Village](#), a designation that allows it access to financing and expertise for transit-related development. And, as Mayor Buccellato pointed out, “The train station brings people through town, which is a positive for the borough.” He is trying to find builders for a retail and residential project near the station.

There are those like Karen Bull, who moved here from [Brooklyn](#) after swearing she’d never leave the city, who appreciate the urban feel of a busy downtown, mixed with the village-like atmosphere of a small town.

“It’s the best of both worlds,” said Ms. Bull, whose three-bedroom colonial cost \$245,000 seven years ago. “I can walk in my backyard and get that quiet, far-away feeling. And then there’s a Starbucks just a block away.”

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

Just 2.4 square miles in size, Matawan is informally divided into several neighborhoods largely defined by its two lakes, Lefferts and Matawan, and the two major highways that bisect Matawan, Routes 79 and 34. In recent years, properties facing the lakes have gained value, particularly in Edgemere Heights, with older homes on larger properties near Lake Lefferts.

When the Renners moved to Matawan in 2004, they paid \$275,000 for a small house built in the 1800s with low ceilings and one closet, but on a large lot backing up to Lake Lefferts. Last year, they sold that house and moved into a 3,000-square-foot

house they built next door after subdividing the property. Ms. Renner, skeptical about moving to Matawan at first, now says she would live nowhere else.

“It’s a very cool, old-school kind of town,” she said. “The houses are not all the same square boxes. We can walk into town or to the train station. My kids ice skate across the lake to get to their friends’ houses.”

Barbara Tuttle, a broker with ReMax Champions in Matawan and a 45-year resident, said she sold a house last fall to a young couple who had stopped by her table at the annual street fair in the Lochslea Heights neighborhood, which has an eclectic mix of smaller Capes and ranches.

“All the neighbors were out,” she said, “and they said they just loved the energy of the community and bought the house that day.”

Another affordable neighborhood is called Green and White Village, because all its houses were painted white with green shutters when they were built in the 1940s. Since then, most have been repainted and many redone.

The expanded Cape that Ms. Bragg and Mr. Colón bought last October for \$370,000 is in the Freneau section — a hilly, wooded area named after the Revolutionary War poet Philip Freneau, who lived here and is buried in the neighborhood.

Matawan’s oldest buildings can be found along Main Street. There are 18th-century mansions as well as grand Victorians, some converted for commercial use. The newest homes are the 157 condominiums at the Preserve at Matawan on Route 79, which opened last year. There are also several rental complexes as well as an adult community, Cheesequake Village.

WHAT YOU’LL PAY

Compared with some neighboring communities, where new development drove up prices that then fell during the recession, Matawan has seen a less precipitous price drop. Donna Bruno, an agent at Coldwell Banker, ascribes that in part to limited development.

“There isn’t a lot of opportunity for future growth here,” said Ms. Bruno, who grew up in Matawan, “because they don’t have that land available. That helps resales tremendously because they don’t have the competition of new homes.”

In 2009, the average price of the 75 homes sold in Matawan was \$323,826, versus \$336,751 for the 47 sold in 2008.

There are 53 houses on the market, ranging in price from \$157,000, for a three-bedroom fixer-upper built in 1920 to \$499,900 for a five-bedroom three-bath ranch built in 1975.

Larger colonials, lakefront properties and the few newer homes list for \$350,000 to \$500,000, while the smaller Capes, split-levels and ranches in areas like Lochslea Heights sell for \$250,000 to \$400,000, Ms. Bruno said. The one-, two- and three-bedroom condos at the Preserve at Matawan start at \$269,990.

THE COMMUTE

The Matawan-Aberdeen station serves most of western Monmouth County, offering a direct line to [New York City](#), with commuting times ranging from 59 to 70 minutes. Matawan is also just off Exit 117 of the Garden State Parkway, which — traffic depending — gets you into the city in 50 to 60 minutes. [New Jersey Transit](#)'s 133 Line provides bus service to Port Authority.

WHAT TO DO

Activity is focused on the lakes, and on Raritan Bay. Lake Lefferts, the site of the borough's Fourth of July fireworks display, is popular for skating, fishing and canoeing. A park at its north end has fishing docks and canoe and kayak rentals. Cheesequake State Park in neighboring Old Bridge offers boating and swimming in the Raritan Bay, as well as camping. The closest ocean beach, Sandy Hook, is 13 miles away; beaches like Belmar and Spring Lake are about a half-hour's drive.

Matawan's downtown has several bars and restaurants, and shopping is available along Routes 34 and 79, just outside of town. One popular restaurant is the Buttonwood Manor facing Lake Lefferts, a site of celebratory events for decades. The First Baptist Church on Main Street has pancake breakfasts and seasonal festivals throughout the year. The Burrowes Mansion, also on Main Street, offers conducted tours and historical re-enactments.

THE SCHOOLS

The high and middle schools of the [Matawan-Aberdeen Regional School District](#) cover both communities. SAT averages at Matawan Regional High School last year were 499 in math, 489 in reading and 490 in writing, versus 514, 492 and 494 statewide. The high school football team won the state division championship in 2009.

Elementary students are divided among the Cliffwood, Strathmore, Ravine Drive and Lloyd Road schools.

THE HISTORY

Founded in 1686 by a group of Scottish Presbyterians, Matawan was originally part of the shipping settlement of Middletown Point, on Raritan Bay. In the 1800s the area was home to two piano factories, two tile factories, a basket factory and a lime kiln that processed oyster shells from nearby Keyport.