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Town by Town: Haverford, a place that's home for a lifetime

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318 Bewley Road for sale June 16, 2014. (DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer)

by **Alan J. Heavens**, Real Estate Writer

One in a continuing series spotlighting real estate markets in the region's communities.



You can often tell a lot about a town by the level of enthusiasm expressed by real estate agents who sell houses there. The level rises when the agents are longtime residents, or grew up there, or live close by. That's especially true for Haverford Township, where, agents say, folks often move from first home to last over a lifetime, and those who leave often find their way back to one of the multiple zip codes that define the neighborhoods here: Havertown, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, Ardmore, Drexel Hill and Wynnewood.

U.S. Census data show the township, often described as being on the edge of the Main Line but more affordable, lost only seven people between 2000 and 2010. From what the agents say, those seven may be back already.

John McAleer, of Century 21 Alliance in Havertown, has lived in 10 different houses in this Delaware County town in 61 years. When you've been selling real estate for three decades, he says, "you come across a house you like and you move." Haverford Township, McAleer says, is a "great community, and that helps the housing market maintain its value and desirability."

"People who grew up here want to live here," he says. "When people come here to visit and they see the type of community we live in, they want to live here as well."

Holly Goodman, of Duffy Real Estate in Narberth, says she "didn't even know [Haverford Township] existed when I moved here 26 years ago," but she was attracted by the same things that lure others here. "Affordability, and the schools," she says, noting that there "are a lot of young families" in the mix.

"Of three of my listings that settled recently, two buyers were newly married, and one had been renting in Ardmore but were expecting," she says.

Tyler G. Wagner and his brother, Clay, are the fourth generation of a family selling real estate here. "There are a lot of generational families here," Tyler Wagner says.

"It is an interesting mix of people and housing, with an educational system that is next to none," says Wagner, who grew up here and whose four children go to school here.

Such enthusiasm has sustained the local housing market - though as Brian Kane of Re/Max Preferred Realtors in Newtown Square says, the township did not escape the effects of the prolonged housing downturn.

"Values went down in 2008 and leveled off in the first quarter of 2013," says Kane, who grew up in Drexel Hill. "Prices have stabilized but are not rising rapidly." In the first five months of 2014, 673 houses sold here, nearly 40 more than in the same period of 2013, Kane says. Average prices rose 1 percent, from \$331,151 in 2013 to \$336,778 in 2014. "That 1 percent does not surprise me, since that is countywide," Kane says of the year-over-year boost; average sale price is 91 percent of list price.

"Things are very good here," says McAleer, "but with that said, it is a very funny market. If a house doesn't sell in the first two weeks, it usually takes three to six months with price adjustments."

From a low of 160 active listings earlier this year, the number of houses for sale has grown to 265 as the "spring market has increased demand," Wagner says, adding that number "may be a little heavy since it includes homes that are under contract." During the downturn, there typically were 350 homes for sale at any time, Wagner says.

Though there are more active listings now, just 10 houses are for sale in the township's "sweet spot" - the \$400,000-to-\$500,000 detached-single market, he says, resulting in multiple-bid situations. Those usually result in sale prices near asking, the agents say, especially if the house is priced well and is in good condition.

Neighborhood - that is, how close a house is to the Lower Merion or Radnor border - determines price and size, though the agents say the township offers more value for the money. Says McAleer: "You can buy a house in Havertown for as little as \$150,000 for a twin or spend \$4 million, with the median around \$300,000." (The current top listing is \$3.999 million on College Avenue.)

Neighborhood differences are marked, Kane says, with "Havertown's primarily brick Colonials with three to four bedrooms and 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 baths, and larger singles on bigger lots close to the Merion Country Club, where the Main Line starts."

Goodman says most singles "in decent condition sell in the low \$300,000s or the high twos, but some need work."

Wagner says he has sold several fixer-uppers to buyers using loans to remodel them, but he and the other agents agree that most buyers want homes in move-in condition.

"They are willing to pay top dollar if they can just move in, and avoid houses that would be much better value with a little work," says McAleer.

Haverford Township would seem to offer a lot for the money: its schools and pleasant tree-lined streets; 30 parks; a growing number of recreational venues and, for the last three years, Wagner says, a growing restaurant and "Philly-like" small-bar scene in Havertown.

To McAleer, though, the township's biggest asset is its people. "When I had a fire at my home three years ago, many people in Havertown did everything they could to help my family through a tough time in our lives," he says. "How can I put that into words? How can those acts of kindness be measured?"