

As Seen in The New York Observer Country Real Estate Supplement

It's Alive!

Just in Time for Halloween, The Real Estate Market has Risen from the Dead

BY STEVE CUTLER

The market is alive, according to broker Elyse Harney, owner of Elyse Harney Real Estate in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Savvy buyers have been following properties they like online, waiting for them to drop to prices that make sense.

"And when they see a price that they think offers some value," says Harney, "they jump."

For example, she says, "we have a beautifully renovated home with direct frontage on Lakeville Lake that we have been inching down. It was \$1.75 million, then \$1.5 million." Then, finally, when it dropped to \$1.375 million, says Harney, "we had three offers." The property is now in contract slightly above the asking price. "There's a breakpoint in the \$1.5 million range," explains Harney — the sweet spot in the market for high-end properties.

Even as temperatures fall, the market has been heating up lately in Litchfield, not only because of the perceived value in the area, but also because of "the beautiful fall foliage in New England," says Harney. And, while it is just two hours from New York City, she adds, "the drive is scenic, and when you get up here, you see the rolling hills. It's beautiful."

Harney Real Estate has some particularly alluring listings at the moment, including a meticulous renovation of the oldest house in Sharon, Connecticut. The six-plus acre property, located on South Main Street, includes a 6,000-square-foot, six-bedroom/five-and-a-half bathroom main house and six-stall carriage house converted into an apartment. Surrounded by spacious lawns and lovely gardens, the property, offered at \$2.25 million, has a pool and tennis court.

Also in Sharon, Harney offers a charming, light-filled three-Bedroom/three-Bath home with large deck overlooking more than two landscaped acres, for just \$595,000. With the master bedroom on the first level and the two bedrooms above, according to broker Elyse Harney Morris, Harney's daughter — known as "E2" at the office to avoid confusion — the property is "ideal for people who want first-floor living, with a place for their kids when they come to visit, or a young family as a good starter house."

While Harney Real Estate now operates out of five offices, "we are still a single owner, boutique real estate company," says Harney, "with a tradition of trust. We go over and above in dealing with both our customers and other agents to make them comfortable and happy."

Even New York's most celebrated vacation and second home destination offers irresistible values this season.

According to broker Geoff Gifkins, owner of Perspective Properties in Southampton, vacation and second homes are more affordable in the Hamptons than they have been in years.

"Prices have definitely come down over the last two years, as we've all expected," says Gifkins. "And sellers are more inclined to negotiate. It's a great opportunity for a buyer to come out here and buy a property at 2005 prices."

And buyers are getting the message. "There's been a lot more activity out here," observes Gifkins. "Buyers have more confidence. They think, 'prices are good, mortgage rates are down — it's time to get in and do it!'"

People touring the Hamptons today are surprised by the changes in the area over the last few years. Most notably, says Gifkins, "The Hamptons is a year-round community. A lot of people think it is a summer haven, and it dies off in the winter. That's not the case anymore. It's lively all year round."

"Especially for city people it is a great place," adds Gifkins. "It's only around an hour and a half from the city," he says, and once they arrive, "they can relax and walk on the beach, go shopping, to the cinema — they have everything they need."

An hour and a half from the city? What about the famous four-hour traffic jams?

"That is something that has definitely changed," says Gifkins. "They've widened the highway into Southampton from two lanes to four, and the

speed coming out here has definitely increased."

Some formerly undiscovered towns are catching on in a big way. "Watermill has become very, very popular in terms of sales," says Gifkins. "It's central — in between Southampton and Easthampton — and most of the homes border open farm fields."

Perspective Properties has a particularly spectacular listing in Watermill, a two-story, 13,000-square-foot, six-bedroom/eight-bath home on an estate that includes a tennis court and pool. Listed at \$12 million, the property borders a natural reserve and Mohawk Creek, and has a private dock with access to Mecox Bay. The property rents for \$450,000 year-round and \$350,000 for the summer.

The fall is the prime buying season in the Hamptons, with people looking to acquire homes in time to renovate and furnish for the summer. Plus, says Gifkins, "it's a good time to buy because most of the inventory on the market gets rented during the summer. Now people get to see anything that's available for sale."

Gifkins says easy access to property listings over the Internet has given private real estate agencies a level playing field in which to compete with the large chains. "We'll get the same exposure on search engines," he explains.

"The thing that makes us unique," says Gifkins, "is that we are a very personal, very small agency. We find out what the buyers are looking for, so we won't waste their time. And we have access to all the inventory in the Hamptons, so we can make sure we find the right fit for them."

Those who treasure awe-inspiring mountain vistas, or views of the mighty Hudson River, will find both a couple of hours north of New York City in Greene, Albany and Columbia counties.

And, "we've never seen a better time to buy," says Louise Warner, whose Louise Warner Realty in West Coxsackie, New York, serves all three counties. "The housing prices are down about 10 to 15 percent from two years ago."

Indeed, because of the dip in prices, as well as the \$8,000 stimulus tax incentive, "I've had my best year ever in 32 years as a real estate broker," says Warner. The tax stimulus will likely expire shortly, but she adds, "our buyers realize that real estate remains a strong investment — one of the best they will ever make. It's definitely a wonderful time to purchase a home."

Located just over two hours from Manhattan along the New York State Thruway, the counties offer an easy commute by car or by train to the Amtrak station in Hudson, New York.

Outstanding ski resorts abound in Windham and Hunter Mountain, says Warner, "and Hudson has antiques and shops and offers beautiful homes right on the Hudson River."

Second-home buyers will find "everything from Victorians to brand-new contemporary style homes," says Warner. "Whatever the client is seeking I can assure you, we have it here."

For example, in Durham, for just \$798,000, Warner offers a 5,400-square-foot, five-bedroom/six-bath custom-built home with a huge deck and front porch on four-and-a-half acres with 360 degree, breathtaking mountain views in five states — close to a water park, horseback riding, state park, golfing, two ski resorts and lots of antique shops.

In New Baltimore, for less than the price of a studio in Manhattan, Warner lists a 1994 three-bedroom/two-and-a-half bath custom-built post and beam home with 19th century barn on four landscaped acres with breathtaking views. Just minutes from the Thruway, two hours from the city, the home is listed for \$345,000.

Warner and her two agents at Louise Warner Realty, she says, "treat every client with kid gloves. We pay strict attention to every detail to assure that everyone gets exactly what they're looking for."

And while Warner maintains a high profile — "I advertise my properties on over 60 websites," she says — "most of my business is done strictly by referrals. We really do pride ourselves in a that."