

# The New York Times

REAL ESTATE

## *A Town Right Out of Central Casting*

Living In

By DAVE CALDWELL JUNE 15, 2008



OLD-TIME Yes, Madison does have a Starbucks. But, at the heart of downtown, it also has an independent pharmacy and a family-run jeweler. One thing that shoppers could use more of is parking.

Warren Westura for The New York Times

MADISON, N.J., is so quaint and charming that people often say the downtown could pass for a movie set — which probably explains why it has done duty as a setting in films like “The World According to Garp” and “The Family Stone,” and in episodes of “The Sopranos.”

But there is much more to Madison than its manicured facade. As home to two colleges — Drew University and Fairleigh Dickinson University’s College at Florham — this borough of 16,000 residents, 25 miles west of New York, has an international flavor.

And by the end of the summer, the area that includes Madison will gain the New York Jets football team, which is completing a corporate headquarters and training facility in Florham Park, on Madison's western border, and a number of executives and players are expected to become Madison residents.

"It's like a little U.N. around here sometimes, and I mean that in a good way," said Adrienne Kern, a mother of two, who has lived here 11 years with her husband, David. "People think there are just Wall Streeters living here."

Of course, diversity is a relative term in the suburbs, as revealed by numbers from the 2000 Census — the most recent available: 6 percent of the borough's population counted themselves as Hispanic and 4 percent as Asian. Of the students in Madison schools last year, 7.5 percent cited Spanish as their native language, and 1.7 percent cited Korean.

A sense of volunteerism predominates in Madison. Mary-Anna Holden, a 21-year resident who is in her first term as mayor of Madison, said more than 900 residents showed up this year for the town's May Day cleanup.

"We love parades," said Berly Teele, a Madison resident who is an agent for Weichert Realtors. "It's an old-fashioned town."

When a young mother here died after an illness, Ms. Teele said, residents pitched in to make meals for the family.

When a young girl contracted leukemia, classmates sold purple ribbons to raise money for her medical care. Ms. Kern said, "If there's a cause or a need, the community response is just overwhelming."

All of these assets — in addition to Madison's accessibility to [Manhattan](#) via New Jersey Transit — have helped buffer real estate prices somewhat, despite the general downturn. The schools are good, and crime is low, Ms. Holden said. The hot topic at the last borough council meeting, she added, was the possibility of changing the [Memorial Day](#) parade route.

Yes, Starbucks has moved in, and there is a Jaguar dealership on Main Street. But then again the shops at the center of town, near a tall clock, include an old-time independent pharmacy, a photo shop and a family jeweler. A hot-dog vendor works the sidewalk.

Main Street, in particular, can become crowded, even on days when there are no parades, and Ms. Holden is hoping to get a developer to build a parking garage in the downtown area. (Street parking is not always plentiful.)

“It’s quiet here, and you can’t go out at 2 in the morning and go to the diner,” said Jennifer Catrini, a stay-at-home mother. “But there’s no anonymity here, and a lot of people really like that.”

### **WHAT YOU’LL FIND**

Route 124, or Main Street, runs east-west through town and is lined with grocery stores, car dealerships, restaurants and shops. To the west of the town center is Drew University, on a picturesque wooded campus. The Fairleigh Dickinson campus straddles the border with Florham Park.

The train line runs parallel to Route 124, one or two blocks to the south, and the town hall, the train station and a Presbyterian church, with a pretty white spire, are near one another. Madison could pass (and sometimes has passed, in the movies) for a [New England](#) town.

The mix of houses, while relatively heavy on colonials, remains fairly eclectic. Interspersed among the center-hall homes on Prospect Street and its surrounding neighborhood are sprawling brick 1950s and ’60s homes and impressive Victorians.

“The feel of the town is very pleasant,” said Patricia Bowers, a Prudential [New Jersey](#) Properties agent based in Verona, because the land surrounding the houses tends to be “slightly larger than what you would expect for small colonials.”

## **WHAT YOU'LL PAY**

There have recently been 70 houses in Madison borough listed on [gsmls.com](http://gsmls.com), the Garden State Multiple Listing Service Web site; prices run from \$299,000, for a three-bedroom house built in 1900, to \$3.55 million, for a Georgian colonial with five bedrooms and five baths on a 1.3-acre wooded lot with a pond.

The median sale price for 76 houses last year was about \$588,000 — down from \$603,000 in 2006 (but still up 48 percent from the median sale price of \$396,000 in 2000). According to the listing service, houses stayed on the market for an average of 54 days in the first four months of 2008, the same as in the first four months of 2007. Tax bills averaged \$9,887, with trash and sewer service included.

Partly because of its easy access to [New York City](#), several agents said, Madison has not been hit hard by the real estate turbulence, with sale prices dipping by about 5 percent on average.

In general, the mix of age groups in Madison keeps it from being just “a baby-boomer town, or a town of retirees,” said Donald R. Marcy, who has lived in Madison for 40 years and is an agent for Coldwell Banker.

## **WHAT TO DO**

As in other New Jersey suburbs, the community pool is a big draw, with an annual family pass available to residents for \$350. In the warm weather, Mrs. Catrini said, she splits her time between the pool and her garden. She spots lawn-service trucks here and there, but says many residents seem to enjoy doing their own yard work.

Near Lincoln Square, with its four-screen movie theater, is an ice-cream parlor called McCool's. The Nautilus Diner on Main Street is a good place to run into neighbors. Over all, the restaurant scene has gone beyond just pizza and Chinese, according to residents. For instance, there is the Garlic Rose Bistro,

with its unusual garlic-inspired menu, and Shanghai Jazz, which offers live music six nights a week.

The F. M. Kirby Shakespeare Theater on the Drew campus is host to the Shakespeare Theater of New Jersey. "Romeo and Juliet" is on the 2008 schedule, but Shakespeare is not the only playwright on offer: "A Streetcar Named Desire" is scheduled from Sept. 10 to Oct. 5.

Residents say they wish there were a few more trails to ride a bike, or to take a nature walk. The businesses along Main Street are spread out just enough that errand runners feel the need to drive from one to another — even though the town has sidewalks.

"We don't have a parking problem, we have a walking problem," Mayor Holden said, "and hopefully, high gas prices will help us break that mentality."

## **THE SCHOOLS**

About 2,200 students are enrolled in the public school system. According to figures compiled by the state Department of Education, Madison High School had 777 students last year in Grades 9 through 12. There were 203 students in the senior class.

Madison High students who took the SAT in 2007 averaged 569 in math, 560 in reading and 561 in writing; state averages were 501, 491 and 489. Nearly 74 percent of the class of 2007 planned to go to four-year colleges; 19 percent planned to go to two-year colleges.

The Madison Junior School has 383 students in seventh and eighth grades. There are three schools for students from kindergarten through sixth grade: Central Avenue (499 students), Torey J. Sabatini (322 students) and Kings Road (295 students). Average class size at Central Avenue Elementary was 19.2, the state average.

## **THE COMMUTE**

Madison's handsome 92-year-old stone train station — near the Hartley Dodge Memorial, the prim town hall — is on the Morristown Line, which offers Midtown Direct service to Penn Station. A monthly pass is \$246. The commute takes 50 to 63 minutes.

Because Madison encompasses only four square miles, many commuters either walk or bike to the station.

But three parking lots are in its vicinity: a 73-space lot, with parking offered at \$2 a day, and two permit lots with 338 spaces total for \$400 per resident per year. At each lot, parking is free after 4 p.m. Residents often use the lots while shopping or dining downtown in the evenings.

## **THE HISTORY**

Madison, named after President James Madison, was nicknamed the Rose City because of a 19th-century rose-growing industry started by wealthy residents drawn to Madison by its location on the Morris & Essex train line. The town's seal includes a rose; its Web site is [rosenet.org](http://rosenet.org).

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