

# The New York Times

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REAL ESTATE

## *The Town That ‘Grows With You’*

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Living In

By JILL P. CAPUZZO NOV. 9, 2012

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**CYCLE SEASON** Proceeding past the Saltbox Museum, the home of the New Providence Historical Society and one of the oldest structures in a borough with a low profile and highly rated schools.  
Juan Arredondo for The New York Times

NEW PROVIDENCE High School has been getting a lot of attention lately. First it provided the setting for “Win Win,” a film about a high school

wrestling team that became an indie hit last year. This September it was named [New Jersey's](#) top-rated high school by a statewide magazine, which led to a feature segment on one of [New York City's](#) evening news broadcasts a few weeks back.

All this notice has been a bit heady for the school, and the people who live in New Providence, many of whom speak of the small-town atmosphere in a place whose low profile they relish. "Because it's so tiny, people tend to buzz right through it," said Michele DiBenedetto, a 17-year resident and a broker with Prudential. "But distinctions like being named top school are starting to put us on the map."

In addition to the schools, this Union County borough appeals to would-be buyers with its wide range of affordable housing, particularly in comparison to neighboring Summit and Chatham.

There is also its hassle-free commute thanks to the two train stations serving the town, and the neighborliness appreciated by many of New Providence's 12,000 residents.

That helpful spirit was recently put to the test in the aftermath of [Hurricane Sandy](#), which plunged the downtown area and most residences into darkness, while downed trees throughout town had the public works department on overtime. About a third of residents remained without power a week later, according to the police department. But the borough's recently instituted [Code Red](#) alert system proved valuable to residents like Ms. DiBenedetto, who said she had been appreciative of the frequent status updates on her cellphone during the days she was without power.

Jen and Scott Wetzel, who moved to town in March, have already developed a close circle of friends: six couples in their Murray Hill Farm neighborhood who, in good weather at least, get together for cookouts, outdoor movie screenings and dinners while their children ride bikes and play together.

So eager was the neighborhood for the family to move in, Ms. Wetzel recalled, that the welcome wagon arrived before the paint dried. “Everyone was so friendly,” she said. “We weren’t even living here yet, we were just painting and putting in new floors, and neighbors were bringing over cookies and brownies and inviting us over.” The house, a 3,700-square-foot four-bedroom colonial, cost \$875,000.

Raymond Hu and Maggie Lin’s son is just 7 months old, but the couple are planning ahead: schools were the most important factor in their house hunt. They settled on New Providence not long before its high school was cited as the state’s top school.

“I had a feeling New Providence would do well, but my wife was really surprised,” Mr. Hu said. “She was singing when she heard.”

The high school principal, Paul Casarico, was thrilled by [New Jersey Monthly’s](#) top ranking of the school, which knocked out a neighboring rival, Millburn High School, the previous two-time winner. And success was all the sweeter coming as it did after the school’s brush with fame as the setting for “Win Win,” a 2011 film starring Paul Giamatti and written by two alumni.

Citing programs like the senior internship project and the “iPad initiative,” which is to provide each student in Grades 9, 10 and 11 with a tablet computer, Mr. Casarico said his school had worked hard to stay ahead of the curve, but credited the honor to the students themselves. “We’ve got great students,” he said. “They come well prepared, from their parents and from the lower schools. So a recognition like this is just a confirmation that what you’ve been doing is working.”

## WHAT YOU'LL FIND

Situated on 3.6 square miles on the western slope of the Watchung [Mountains](#), this community 28 miles west of New York is marked by hilly, tree-lined areas like the aptly named Tall Oaks, whose larger properties and a Summit ZIP code command higher prices.

### On the Market



#### **89 CRANE CIRCLE**

A four-bedroom two-bath split-level built in 1964 on 0.28 acres, listed at \$679,000. (908) 376-0962



#### **95 PINE WAY**

A five-bedroom two-bath expanded Cape built in 1954 on 0.87 acres, listed at \$1.395 million. (908) 277-1398



#### **83 SPRINGFIELD AVENUE**

A three-bedroom one-bath Victorian built in 1888 on 0.33 acres, listed at \$550,000. (908) 273-2991

The houses most typically seen, however, are the split-levels, Capes and ranches found along the main thoroughfares and dotting the streets of several pocket neighborhoods convenient to the downtown area.

Many of the houses were built in the 1950s and '60s, after Bell Labs moved its headquarters to the area known as Murray Hill. Today Bell's parent company, Alcatel-Lucent, maintains its domestic headquarters just across Mountain Avenue in Berkeley Heights. The New Providence area is also home to BOC Gases, Bard medical products, LexisNexis and the New Jersey Sharing Network, among others.

The last major housing development, built in the mid-1990s, was Murray Hill Farm, 81 homes that, because the developer was held to a "no look-alike" requirement, offer architectural variety. Across from the Murray Hill train station is Murray Hill Square, a onetime retail complex converted in the 1980s to 50 Williamsburg-style town houses. Also near that station are Green Way, a complex of 26 town houses completed this year, and Foley Square, 22 town houses now being built.

The downtown area, along South Street and Springfield Avenue, includes a strip mall, a larger shopping plaza with a new A & P supermarket, and several local stores,

like McGrath Hardware and Barth's Market, a third-generation German butcher.

## **WHAT YOU'LL PAY**

The wide range of housing prices makes New Providence a desirable town for young families looking to establish a foothold. "The town grows with you," said Kara M. Thoms, a lifelong resident and a broker with Lois Schneider Realtor. "You've got starter homes and million-dollar houses. You can start with a condo and move up without having to move out."

There are 59 homes on the market in New Providence, ranging from a one-bedroom one-bath condominium listed at \$258,000 to a five-bedroom four-and-a-half-bath house on Countryside Drive listed at \$2.95 million. The average sale price in the first three-quarters of 2012 was \$567,773, compared with \$573,870 over the same period in 2011, according to the [Garden State Multiple Listing Service](#).

Houses in the Murray Hill Farm area average around \$900,000, although some have sold in the \$1.3 million range, while properties in the Tall Oaks section range from the \$500,000s to more than \$700,000. The four-bedroom two-and-a-half-bath split-level in the Murray Hill section that Mr. Hu and Ms. Lin recently bought for \$622,000 is fairly typical of the community. The couple pay almost \$13,300 in taxes.

As for town houses, they start in the high \$200,000s, for a one-bedroom at Murray Hill Square, and approach \$1 million at the new Green Way complex.

Looking to move from a high-rise apartment in Jersey City, Alex Prather and Akiko Matsuo quickly found Summit out of their price range, and earlier this year they shifted their focus to New Providence. With a 4-year-old son and a baby on the way, a good school system was a top priority, as was an easy commute for Mr. Prather, who travels to Newark for his management job at [Prudential.com](#). In late September they moved into a three-bedroom 1960 colonial that they had bought for \$410,000. With its

sizable backyard and large deck, Mr. Prather said, it “offers lots of potential.”

## **WHAT TO DO**

With two Olympic-sized pools, the [New Providence Community Pool](#) is a big draw in the summer, as is the private Crestview Swim and Tennis Club. The 2,065-acre [Watchung Reservation](#) in neighboring Mountainside offers hiking and horseback trails, fishing streams and a nature center.

Cultural offerings within a short drive include the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, the Center for Visual Arts in Summit, and the theaters and museums of Newark, 13 miles away. For shopping, most go to the Mall at Short Hills.

## **THE SCHOOLS**

Students attend two elementary schools, [Salt Brook](#) and [Allen W. Roberts](#), which have 612 and 627 students respectively. The New Providence Middle School, with 337 enrolled, shares its campus with the high school, where there are 623 students. SAT averages at [New Providence High School](#) last year were 600 in math, 566 in reading and 571 in writing, versus 517, 493 and 496 statewide. The high school marching band has 120 members.

New Providence is also home to the [Summit Speech School](#) for the hearing-impaired.

## **THE COMMUTE**

New Jersey Transit trains run from the New Providence and Murray Hill stations directly to Pennsylvania Station, with a one-way charge of \$9.25 and \$10, respectively. The commute takes about an hour. The area is also served by Interstate 78, which feeds into the Holland Tunnel.

## **THE HISTORY**

Settled by Puritans in 1720, the town was originally called Turkey Town because of the abundance of wild turkeys. Then, one Sunday morning in 1759, the choir loft at the Presbyterian Church collapsed onto mercifully empty pews below. Declaring the timing of the incident “providential,” the pastor suggested changing the town’s name to New Providence.

### ***Correction: November 18, 2012***

*A picture caption last Sunday with the “Living In” article, for a three-bedroom Victorian on Springfield Avenue in New Providence, N.J., on the market for \$550,000, had an incorrect street number. It is 1483, not 83.*

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