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If You're Thinking of Living In/Syosset; A Hamlet Where the Schools Are Stellar

By John Rather

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IN Syosset, a densely suburban hamlet in the Nassau County town of Oyster Bay where home prices climbed steeply through the 1990's, when people look for location, location, location, the location that seems to count the most is the Syosset Central School District. "It's a very, very excellent school district, and that's what we sell," said Roberta Marcus, a sales associate at Hough & Guidice Gatewood Realty in Syosset.

Many who buy do not need convincing. "The first thing for us was the schools; that's why we came here," said Larissa Souza, a secretary, who said she moved here with her husband, Izidro, an electrical engineer, and their 8-year-old daughter about two years ago.

The Souzas paid more than \$300,000 for a four-bedroom ranch, an average price range here five years ago but now on the low side. They had been renting in neighboring Woodbury, a more expensive hamlet that is also in the Syosset school district, and one of several higher-priced areas on Syosset's borders.

Besides top-ranked schools, Syosset offers a Long Island Rail Road connection that gets commuters to the city in under an hour and -- compared with neighboring areas and other parts of the school district -- relative affordability in a community where single-family dwellings predominate. All these factors combine to provide what real estate professionals say is good value for prospective buyers.

Elise Williams, the branch manager of the Syosset office of Coldwell Banker Sammis, said that even small ranches south of Jericho Turnpike in the South Grove section that

were built on slabs with carports now often command prices above \$300,000. Most have been expanded.

In the current market, a "tiny ranch with no basement selling in the high \$200,000's, low \$300,000's would be a steal," said **Ed Gitlin**, the owner of Century 21 Benjamin Realty. A five-room, three-bedroom ranch was recently on the market for \$299,000.

On the other end of the scale, colonial and contemporary houses north of Jericho Turnpike in the Sagamore section and on Syosset's very own Rodeo Drive sell from the \$600,000's up to \$1 million and beyond.

At the lone condominium complex, the 215-unit two-decade-old Hidden Ridge, a three-bedroom unit was on the market for \$499,000. There are no co-ops or apartment houses. Homes for rent, a rarity, go for about \$2,200 a month, brokers said.

Although Syosset could not be called a Wall Street town, a description that fits certain other generally higher-priced areas of Nassau's North Shore, declines in the stock market and the perception that good times for investors may be at a close have taken a toll. "The real estate market has not softened really to speak of," Ms. Williams said. "The difference is that not so long ago a house could be falling down and buyers were bidding over the asking price. People are still buying, but only the redone houses are going quickly."

"The prices aren't dropping yet, but you don't have three people waiting to buy every house," Ms. Marcus said.

Mr. Gitlin said some sellers were reducing asking prices as inventory edged up. "The market is still strong, but it's running out of gas a little bit," he said. "People who were trying to advertise and sell their own houses are asking for help from the brokers now."

THERE has been no pulling back in the schools. In May, district voters approved a \$44.6 million bond issue for modular classrooms and completion of a wideband network that will bring data, telephones and video to every classroom.

The district superintendent, Dr. Carole G. Hankin, said current enrollment in kindergarten through grade 12 in the district's 10 schools was 6,150, up by about 1,000 from 10 years ago. "We believe it's up because the district is so much in demand," she said.

In upper-rank Nassau County public school districts, 95 percent of students typically go on to either four- or two-year colleges. Syosset schools top even this, sending 94 percent

of 1999 graduates to four-year colleges and universities, the highest percentage in the county, according to the district.

Average College Board scores for the class of 2000 were 552 in the verbal test and 591 in math, far above the New York averages for college-bound seniors of 494 in verbal and 506 in math. The national averages were 505 in verbal and 514 in math.

The high school and the district's two middle schools for grades 6 through 8 have each been named schools of excellence within the past several years by the United States Department of Education. The high school offers 23 advanced placement courses in which students may earn college credits.

The percentage of students who scored at or above grade level in state standardized tests for reading and math is among the highest for any Long Island district. A world language course starts in first grade, when students choose among French, Spanish and Italian. All study Latin in fifth grade. In addition to these languages, Russian, Japanese and American Sign Language are taught in the high school. The district plans to introduce Mandarin Chinese to the elementary school program next fall.

Our Lady of Mercy Academy, a colonnaded private Catholic secondary school for girls on a spacious campus in Syosset, has 500 students in grades 9 through 12, its peak capacity. Sister Margaret Ann Hartigan, the co-principal, said virtually all of the some 110 graduates in the class of 2000 went on to college, with 60 percent being offered scholarships. Tuition is \$5,200 a year, she said.

St. Edward the Confessor School, a Catholic elementary school in Syosset, has 272 students in pre-K through grade 8. The school's principal, Anne Schaefer, said a nursery program for 3-year-olds would begin in September. The school emphasizes religious training and academics. Average tuition is \$2,600, she said.

If schools are a strong suit, traffic on main roads is the bane of Syosset. Several roads converge in a knot in the downtown around Jackson Avenue, a local shopping area. The sprawling railroad station parking lot, where town parking permits cost \$20 for two years, is filled on weekdays. Jericho Turnpike, Route 25, a major shopping area, is also often congested.

The Long Island Expressway and the Seaford-Oyster Bay Expressway, though convenient, bring noise to abutting streets in an area once filled with woods and farms.

Matinecock Indians once hunted in the wooded hills and vales of Syosset but sold these and other lands to an Englishman, Robert Williams, in 1648. The name Syosset may be derived from a Matinecock word meaning a place in the pines. By the mid-18th century

Dutch farmers had cleared some of the woods for fields. The Long Island Rail Road arrived in 1855 to connect the hamlet to New York City, spurring farming, which remained the main industry until World War II.

IN the postwar period, the population and single-family housing exploded, but by the mid-1970's little land was left to build on and population stability set in. Figures for the 2000 census showed that Syosset had lost slightly more than 400 residents since 1990. Roy Fedelem, a principal planner for the Long Island Regional Planning Board, said the decrease was probably related to a fractional decline in the number of people per household, rising school enrollment notwithstanding.

The 2000 census also showed that Syosset's Asian population was 12.7 percent, one of the highest rates on Long Island.

For recreation there is the 48-acre Syosset Woodbury Community Park. The park, run by the Town of Oyster Bay, has a swimming pool, an ice rink, a children's playground and picnic areas, three baseball fields, basketball, tennis, volleyball, horseshoes, shuffleboard and a nature trail.

An 18-hole, 121-acre town golf course in nearby Woodbury is open Tuesday through Sunday all year, weather permitting, and has a putting green and a driving range. Individual memberships cost \$150 annually for town residents. Members pay \$20 for weekday play and \$27 on weekends and may make reservations. Nonmember town residents pay \$30 during the week and \$36 on weekends. Fees are doubled for nonresidents.

North Shore University Hospital at Syosset, a part of the 18-hospital North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, is an acute-care community hospital with 136 beds. It is known for its Center for Surgical Specialties, the Cohn Pain Management Center and an eye-surgery center.

Civic groups, seemingly one for every neighborhood, add cohesion and protect local interests. "Even though we are not an incorporated village, people really have a strong identity with Syosset," said Dennis O'Brien, a retired New York City Fire Department lieutenant and the president of Residents for a More Beautiful Syosset. The nearly three-year-old group, with 300 member families, maintains a small county park near the railroad and plants flowers in a community garden.

Mr. O'Brien said that when he moved 30 years ago to a small house in the Locust Grove neighborhood south of Jericho Turnpike, the area was solidly working class. "It used to be a lot less expensive," he said. "I don't know if the people moving in now will be working class."