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Real Estate

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*If You're Thinking Of Living In:*

## Byram, CT

*A Corner Of Greenwich But Without The Prices*

By LISA PREVOST

TALK of Greenwich inevitably leads to the price of real estate. The average price of a single-family home here has surpassed \$2.5 million. Downtown, now the province of hedge fund managers, commercial space rents at rates comparable to Midtown Manhattan. Upscale condominiums for "downsizers" are fetching \$3 million or more.

Frequently left out of this discussion are the comparably nominal prices for property in the neighborhood of Byram, a densely populated, beak-shaped square mile bounded by Long Island Sound on one side and the Byram River on the other.

Originally developed in the 19th century for Italian, Slovak, Polish and German immigrants who worked the foundries and factories along the river, the community is often more closely linked with Port Chester, N.Y., its similarly postindustrial neighbor on the opposite shore.

"Years ago, there was kind of a conflict where people from Greenwich never wanted to be associated with Byram, and the people of Byram always said they lived in Byram," said Michael Bocchino, 34, a lifelong resident of Byram and chairman of its active neighborhood association. "People here felt slighted because the town put less money into Byram."

The Greenwich cachet may soon envelope this southwestern corner, however, as local developers move into one of the few areas of town yet to be gentrified. Most recently, the area received a nod

from Antares Investment Partners, owner of the opulent Delamar Greenwich Harbor Hotel and other major properties, with the purchase of a large apartment complex in Byram for conversion into million-dollar condominiums.

The Byram riverfront is also poised for a transformation, as town planners and the neighborhood association complete a master plan for improvements that include a boardwalk and parks along the length of the river. A 20-unit town house community and marina has been approved for construction on two riverfront acres previously reserved for industrial uses on South Water Street. Called Greenwich Landing, the high-end development replaces a heating oil company.

"This is pretty much setting the tone for up and down the Byram River," said John Wahba, a Byram native who is developing the project with his brother James.

### What You'll Find

Interstate 95 bisects Byram, effectively creating two very different areas, one containing some of the town's most expensive homes, and the other some of its most affordable.

Above the highway and away from the shoreline, the hilly terrain is covered with modest single- and multifamily homes set on small lots. The narrow, winding streets and closely set houses give this end of Byram a distinctive village feel, and residents regularly walk to

the Byram Shubert Library, which serves as the community hub, and the small shopping district along Mill and Water Streets.

Below the highway, Byram Shore Road follows the shoreline. This avenue dates to the era of the great industrialists, and their grand "summer cottages," some hidden behind gates, are still interspersed among newer palatial properties. "I find that people new to Greenwich, and those with new money, have trouble saying they live on Byram Shore Road; they say they live in Greenwich," said Kaye Lewis of Kaye Lewis & Associates, a real estate brokerage firm. "But there was an \$18 million sale on that road last year. I mean, this is not for the faint of heart."

In the village area, residents tend to be fiercely loyal to their Byram roots, and old-timers abound. The large number of rental properties have attracted Hispanic immigrants, some of whom are buying multifamily homes to live in, and renting the other units themselves.

Young couples discouraged by the out-of-reach prices elsewhere in Greenwich are also giving Byram a second look. "This is the only area of town that we could afford," said Amy Repik, who bought a three-bedroom home in Byram with her husband, Josh, in December.

The couple had previously rented in Greenwich, and spent two years shopping for houses as far up the shoreline as Norwalk. But Mr. Repik, a municipal employee and Greenwich native, was



reluctant to leave his hometown.

They bought their 1929 colonial for "close to \$600,000," said Mrs. Repik, who commutes to work at Gartner Inc., a market research company in Stamford. The trade-off was a small yard, she noted, but not so small that they can't have a few friends over for a cookout. The planned revitalization of the riverfront also figured into their purchase. The town has allocated about \$1.5 million for design and development of the parks and boardwalk. A second phase calls for the addition of trees, landscaping and benches in the commercial district.

"This side of town has been neglected until now, and this is going to bring the value up," Mrs. Repik said.

### What You'll Pay

While the average price of a single-family home in other areas of Greenwich has shot up more than 30 percent in the last two years, "Byram is still under \$1 million for a single-family home," said Roberta Jurik, an agent with Prudential Connecticut Realty. Primarily colonials and Capes built in the early 1900's, these small homes start at around \$600,000; multifamily homes start at around \$800,000. Many have been improved upon over the years.

"You won't see many houses being torn down because they're over the current allowable floor-area ratio for the lot size, and you couldn't replace them with as big a house," said Paul J. Pugliese, president of the Greenwich Land Company, a real estate company, and chairman of the town's architectural review committee. The new condos will broaden the housing opportunities in Byram and add a little luxury, he said.

The town homes at Greenwich Landing will feature custom kitchen cabinetry and granite countertops, master bedroom suites, three-car garages and 20 boat slips. Priced at about \$2 million, each unit will have three bedrooms and two-and-a-half baths. The setup is convenient for boaters, said Kathryn Clauss, an agent at Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage. "It's a five-minute boat ride from there to the Sound, but you're in a safe harbor while your boat is docked in the river," she said.

Sales have just begun on the converted condominiums at Greenwich Place, formerly an apartment complex known as Putnam Green. Antares is renovating the exteriors

of the buildings and upgrading the interiors with new kitchens, bathrooms, flooring and doors. Prices start at \$600,000 for a studio and range as high as \$2 million for a three-bedroom. Greenwich Fine Properties is handling the sales.

At Greenwich Shore, an apartment complex completed in 2004, all 55 units are rented, and turnover so far has been minimal, Ms. Lewis said. Situated on a ridge high enough to allow some units glimpses of the Long Island Sound, the apartments start at \$1,975 a month for a one-bedroom. The largest unit, at roughly 2,400 square feet, rents for \$5,100.

### What to Do

Greenwich is known for its many parks and beaches, and one of its gems is the 30-acre Byram Shore Park. Located on the Long Island Sound, the park's many shady areas entice picnickers, while the beach boasts the only public swimming pool in town. Public boating facilities have slips for 300 small boats and 90 moorings for larger crafts.

The busy Byram Shubert Library offers special programs, from preschool story hours to Spanish-language forums on first-time home buying. The library is about to undergo a \$3.8 million expansion that will double its size, providing space for more computers, a community room and separate areas for the children and teenagers who flock to the library after school. Byram's commercial district, once pocked with vacancies, has begun to attract some architects, boutiques and salons. There are also banks, delis, a pet shop, an upholsterer, and a popular restaurant called That Little Italian.

Shopping opportunities have expanded considerably since the opening of a big-box retail complex with a movie theater just across the bridge in Port Chester. Dining options on the riverfront include Sam's Bar & Grille, which attracts young crowds in the evening, and the Black Bear Grille.

### The Schools

The Greenwich school system, which rates among the state's highest-performing districts, is a major draw for families. Byram's New Lebanon School is the smallest of the town's 11 elementary schools, with about 240 students in kindergarten to Grade 5. About 40 percent of the student population is Hispanic. The average class size is 18

students.

Nearly 600 students in Grades 6 to 8 attend Western Middle School, also in Byram. About 70 percent of the school's students in eighth grade met the state goal on the Connecticut Mastery Test in reading and mathematics in the 2004-05 school year, compared with about 80 percent for the district as a whole.

Greenwich High School is one of the largest in Connecticut, but manages its size by dividing the roughly 2,780 students into four houses. The school has extensive programs in music, athletics and the visual arts. Average SAT scores for the class of 2005 were 563 for verbal, and 586 for mathematics. Statewide averages were 508 for verbal and 520 for math. Eighty-eight percent of graduates went on to higher education.

### The Commute

Byram is the section of Greenwich closest to Manhattan. The 30-mile commute by car can take as little as 45 minutes on I-95, or twice that, depending on the time of day. The Port Chester train station is closest. Metro-North Railroad trains to Midtown take about 40 minutes. The one-way peak fare is \$14; a monthly pass is \$197.

### The History

Known by several names since Colonial times, Byram acquired its present name only in 1947. Just before that, the area was known as East Port Chester, which makes sense given the community's economic reliance on the foundries and other industries that rose on both sides of the river during the 19th century. One of the well-known industries was a granite quarry, which eventually became what is now Byram Shore Park.

### What We Like

This is a truly walkable community with the feel of an old New England fishing village.

### Looking Ahead

Redevelopment on the Port Chester riverfront is aggravating cut-through traffic, which empties into Byram residential areas off the I-95 exit ramp. "The trucks rumbling down Mill Street are the biggest issue," Mr. Pugliese said.

