

THE REAL DEAL

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Poconos' Lake Naomi seeks to attract a Hamptons crowd

By Rachel Deahl



Fans of Lake Naomi like the area's proximity to New York City.

If you were planning to rent a home for the summer in the Hamptons and didn't get around to it, you're probably out of luck, unless you're willing to consider the other Hamptons.

That's what boosters are calling Lake Naomi in the Poconos, a development that's part of a push in the area to attract a new generation of vacationers who grew up with campy ads for the late, lamented and heart-shape-tub-equipped resort Mount Airy Lodge, which closed its doors in 2001 after 50 years of enticing New Yorkers with its treacly jingles.

Instead of champagne-swilling honeymooners, the area is making a pitch for New Yorkers who want a second home, or even a new primary residence a two-hour drive from Manhattan.

Rob Baxter, a local broker and co-owner of RE/MAX of the Poconos, said three-mile-long Lake Naomi is still "one of the best kept secrets in the second-home market."

Baxter said the community is largely made up of New York and New Jersey residents -- what he dubbed the Route 80 vs. N.J. Corridor split -- and that the average 2006 home sale price in the area was \$328,400.

Asking prices are climbing, according to Baxter. He said that properties on the market now range from a low of \$156,000 to a high of \$1.3 million for lakefront property. There are 84 homes currently for sale.

The Lake Naomi Club, the local country club, plans to open a \$6 million recreation center in May, featuring an indoor pool and tennis courts. Baxter, whose great-grandfather was one of the original builders of the 260-acre community in the late 1800s, thinks the area is going to get more attractive to potential buyers.

"Value is all relative," he said, "but compared to the shore, I think our area is a real bargain and prices are certainly going up."

Because there are only about 2,000 homes in the community, Baxter acknowledges there is a limit to how much the community can grow. But he thinks it's entering a new heyday. "We have gone through the hunting cabins, timeshare and honeymoon eras -- heart-shaped bathtubs and all -- and the second-home boom of the late '80s. Now we are becoming a commuter location for those seeking affordable homes."

Revived train service to New York and a planned reincarnated version of the Mount Airy resort -- this time with a casino -- are still on the drawing board, but could add to the area's appeal, Baxter said.

Proximity to the regional skiing areas Camelback and Big Boulder is another attraction, said Jeff Evans, general manager of the Lake Naomi Club.

He said newer residents are mostly young professionals in their late 20s to mid-40s with families, drawn to ski slopes within a 15-minute drive and summer recreation when the snow -- man-made or natural -- is gone.

Local real estate broker Bob Bossuyt, who now works for Century 21, said the community remains based around the resort, and approximately 75 percent of owners call the lake development their second home.

Bossuyt said the low-end price of a house in the three-by-seven-mile tract remains at about \$150,000, with the mid-level coming in at \$300,000 and the high end sitting at \$550,000. He said only a few lakefront properties break the \$1 million barrier.

For New Yorkers like Rafael Castellanos, those prices were a major draw. The 46-year-old managing partner at the Manhattan-based Expert Title Insurance Agency bought just outside Lake Naomi. After vacationing in the Hamptons for years, Castellanos -- who lives with his wife and two kids in a 1,900-square-foot apartment in Midtown -- said he could no longer face a hellish Friday commute to the East End. After hearing friends from Brooklyn talk about Lake Naomi -- and seeing their vacation home there -- Castellanos decided a cheaper house that is a mere two, mostly traffic-less hours away was the way to go.

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