

Upper Merion Township: A well-known blend of place names, businesses, and housing

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One in a continuing series spotlighting real estate markets in the region's communities.

Just say "King of Prussia," and even the most geographically challenged will know the location of Upper Merion Township.

Add Valley Forge to the explanation, and out-of-towners will be able to get their bearings, as well. Not all of Valley Forge National Historical Park is in Upper Merion, but a large part of it is - about 1,300 acres.

This Montgomery County municipality of 28,365 people also includes such locales as Gulph Mills, Swedesland, Swedesburg, and even some of Wayne, a place that seems to be just about everywhere.

"Wayne is where the more expensive houses are in Upper Merion," says Pam Owsik, an agent with Duffy Real Estate in Narberth and St. David's who has been selling in the township for 26 years.

Those houses would be on the east side of Route 202, she says.

"When you cross Route 202 to the west side, you'll find 1,800-square-foot, three- to four-bedroom single-family houses on nice streets" for under \$500,000, Owsik says.

"There is also a good selection of homes, from condos to \$2 million single-family detached," she notes.

Says the firm's John Duffy, "These are the houses I like to think about: The post-World War II houses in nice little communities that people in those days thought was so far out from Philadelphia."

"It was a pleasant day trip," Owsik recalls.

Duffy's family was from Pennsylvania coal country - Pottsville and Coaldale - "and my Uncle Chester would come to Upper Merion around Thanksgiving to hunt pheasant," the veteran Realtor recalls. "The place he hunted was where GE was later built."

His first job out of college was with J. Leon Altemose, who built Valley Forge Towers - condos and rentals - and the Sheraton Hotel, from which Duffy would look down at his uncle's hunting area.

"I remember that we built 253 units at Valley Forge Towers but forgot to build garages," he says.

"We built 40, and each sold for \$4,500, so we built 40 more garages."

There are a lot of townhouses near the towers that were built later, Owsik says.

Though there continues to be construction within Upper Merion, it is much less than it once was, Owsik and Duffy say.

"There isn't that much land left," she notes.

Lower taxes are the big draw, Owsik says, a result of the diversity of revenue sources within the township's borders.

"You build a \$1.5 million new house in Upper Merion, and the tax bill is \$16,000 to \$20,000 a year," she says.

"Elsewhere, it would be double," Duffy says.

Major employers in Upper Merion include Lockheed Martin with 3,568 employees and Glaxo SmithKline with 2,732 workers.

The township is filled with corporate office parks, and the fact that many of the region's major highways - Interstates 76 and 276 and Routes 202, 422, and 320 - pass through Upper Merion makes it easy to get just about everywhere else.

"All you need to do is spend \$300,000 to \$400,000 on average for a house, and just roll out of bed for work," Duffy says.

King of Prussia Mall is a regional destination because of its high-end stores, Owsik says, but it is a tourist attraction, as well. "People visit Philadelphia and have to come out to see the mall," which has 450 stores and is considered "an ultra-high-performing mall," based, in part, on its \$975 in sales per square foot.

The mall's current expansion, started in 2014 and due to be completed in the fall, means it will be four times larger than when it opened in 1963.

Active residential real estate listings here number 110. In the last 90 days, 98 houses sold.

"The least expensive house on the market is a two-bedroom, one-bath rowhouse for \$119,000," Owsik says. "The highest asking price is \$2 million."

She adds that higher-end properties arrived when Bentley Homes began building its 69-home Whitegate community in Wayne for \$1.5 million to \$2 million.

"It is still a very affordable community," Owsik says of Upper Merion, "and with such a diverse housing stock, you can come in as a first-time townhouse or condo buyer, move up to a single-family, and downsize to a condo without leaving."

