

Valley 'secret' slowly leaks Staunton attracts second-home buyers

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STAUNTON — When Don and Patricia Wilson purchased an old frame house on Frederick Street 16 years ago, they just wanted a comfortable place to stay while visiting their daughter, then a student at Mary Baldwin College.

What began as a weekend retreat turned into a permanent post-retirement home for the Wilsons, who now keep a condominium at the Old Y Lofts and a house in Deerfield.

The couple might have been one of the early pioneers among second-home owners in Staunton and Augusta County, but they are hardly alone these days. Patricia Wilson said she meets several customers a year in her downtown shop, Pen & Paper, who start out as tourists and return as residents.

"Staunton is a well-kept secret that I think is beginning to get out," she said.

Nationwide, second homes and vacation properties accounted for four out of 10 housing sales in 2005, according to studies by the National Association of Realtors. The trend is even spreading into Staunton and the central Valley, as middle-aged, middle-income baby boomers spread out from high-priced areas in Northern Virginia and beyond, some Realtors say.

"It is getting more popular," said Stuart Bishop of Bishop Real Estate. "We're just getting on the map."

The typical second-home buyer has a median annual income of about \$100,000. In a 2006 survey by the National Association of Realtors, one-third of those buyers say they want houses near mountains or natural areas, which are in no short supply in the Valley.

A newer sub-trend among second-home couples is "splitting" — couples who split their time between two homes, often traveling back and forth several times a month. Most often, these buyers are in their late 50s and are transitioning to retirement.

Bob Barron and his partner spend weekends in a refurbished Newtown carriage house and plan to build a post-retirement house on an adjacent vacant lot. Barron, publisher of Preservation magazine, checked out several small, historic cities before settling on Staunton in 2003.

"We looked at a lot of historic communities, and we realized, 'Wow, Staunton's in our backyard,'" he said, noting that he can take a train directly to and from his main home in Alexandria.

Brad and Sandra McNeill bought a house in Staunton in the late 1980s with the intention of retiring here. By 2004, the Maryland couple sold that house, invested in a condo at the Old Y Lofts, and moved in permanently to a historic house on Church Street.

"We didn't come down right away," Sandra McNeill said. "My feeling is it's good to adjust to major life changes."

Michael Organ, owner of the Belle Grae Inn, said four or five people in a typical year will visit his bed and breakfast, then decide to rent an apartment while they search for post-retirement property.

"Staunton is really the center of a lot of retirement-type activities that people are looking for," Organ said. "They can live here at a reasonable mortgage and still have the ambiance of a small village."

But what brings them here? For Bernice Newman Dandridge, who is building an 1,800-square-foot home on West Johnson Street, it's family ties. The California business professor owns a business in Staunton and visits family here four times a year but wanted to put down more permanent roots in Staunton.

"Trying to run things cross-country gets hard," Dandridge said. "When my friends and family from California come in, I don't have to rent a room at the Hampton Inn or something."

For others, it's the allure of Victorian architecture, the closeness to East Coast nightlife and the strength of the local arts community.

"Staunton has a strange way of quietly attracting the right kind of people," said pianist Carsten Schmidt, who splits his time between a Gospel Hill house and a New York apartment. "It attracts really interesting people."

Schmidt and Barron both said they were surprised to find a gay-friendly atmosphere in the city.

If there is a downside to all the baby boomers, Sandra McNeill said it might be that their sheer numbers risk homogenizing the community.

For younger families, a lack of high-paying jobs might keep them from discovering the area, McNeill said.

"I wouldn't want it to become this mecca for just retired people and not for the whole spectrum of people," she said. "I want to see more young children and more working professionals."