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If You're Thinking of Living In/Roosevelt, N.J.; A New Deal Enclave Friendly to the Arts

By JERRY CHESLOW

BORN as a Great Depression-era utopian cooperative for unemployed Jewish New York City garment workers, Roosevelt, N.J., looks pretty much as it did when it was started by the United States Department of the Interior in the late 1930's. Its streets meander around hills and stream beds, and most of its houses back up to green belts or woods, including the sprawling, 5,600 acre state-owned Assunpink Wildlife Management Area to the south.

Of the 334 homes in the 1.8-square-mile Monmouth County borough, 200 are the original Bauhaus-style structures, which resemble low-slung concrete bunkers and have so much steel rebar reinforcement in their walls that cordless telephone reception is obstructed. "Although our housing lots are a half acre," said the planning board chairman, Ralph Seligman, 79, a 50-year resident, "the woods give us the feeling of infinite privacy."

Roosevelt has just a handful of commercial buildings, the largest of which is the Worker's Aim Cooperation Association Building on North Valley Road. Constructed as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in 1936, it started as a garment factory that was owned and operated by the homeowners. That structure has since been subdivided into artists' studios and nonpolluting industrial businesses.

The town's two gasoline stations, which closed long ago, remain eyesores. There are no traffic lights, virtually no crime, no police and little traffic on internal roads. The one store is Rossi's Deli on North Rochdale Avenue, next to the post office, where residents collect their mail because no letter carriers are assigned to Roosevelt. Residents do their grocery shopping in neighboring towns. The closest major mall is the Freehold Mall 12 miles to the southeast.

"When referring to Roosevelt institutions, we use the word 'the,' -- as in 'the' school, 'the' store, 'the' post office -- because there is just one of each," said the mayor, Michael Hamilton.

The only town in New Jersey on both the National and State Registers of Historic Places in its entirety, Roosevelt was originally named Jersey Homesteads. It was one of 34 municipalities started by the federal Subsistence Homesteads program, an experiment that gave workers cooperative ownership over local farms and factories. In 1945, after President Roosevelt's death and long after the government had sold off the factory and farms, the borough renamed itself Roosevelt to honor F.D.R.

"The economic experiment was a failure, but what developed was a tightly knit social fabric," said the borough historian. Arthur Shapiro, who has lived most of his 63 years in Roosevelt.

"The original residents were all Eastern European Jews, and the minutes of the first borough council were even taken in Yiddish," Dr. Shapiro said. "Within weeks of its founding, there were already 36 organizations. School friends became like brothers and sisters, and we all still keep in touch 50 years after we graduated."

Mel A. Adlerman, 70, owner of the Adlerman Agency in nearby Monroe and one of the original settlers in Roosevelt, says that many home buyers in the town are children of the first residents, returning to their roots. Currently, only three houses, all in the Bauhaus style, are on the market. They range in price from \$124,900 to \$142,900. Mr. Adlerman said he had a waiting list of half a dozen people seeking homes in town.

The Bauhaus-type houses were built in two styles: detached and semidetached, with the connection between houses being at the garages. "These homes typically sell for between \$95,000 and just under \$150,000," Mr. Adlerman said. "Price is determined by whether the house is detached or semidetached and whether it has been updated or expanded."

Roosevelt also has about two dozen geodesic dome houses that were built in the 1970's, when there was a dome factory in town. They sell for between \$125,000 for a small two-bedroom model and \$175,000 for an upgraded three-bedroom unit. A two-bedroom, two-bath dome house sold in October for \$149,900. There are also several dozen small ranches, colonials and bivelevs in the Lake Drive section that go for about \$135,000 to \$150,000. Larger four-bedroom colonials built on four-acre lots during the 1990's along Eleanor Lane, named for the former first lady, can go for as much as \$250,000, according to Mr. Adlerman.

The only multifamily project is Solar Village, a 21-unit low-income senior-citizen housing development on Valley Road, that is heated by solar energy.

Among the newer residents is Lois Hunt, a retired opera singer who has several family members in town. In 1997, she moved from Oyster Bay on Long Island, into one of the original structures. "I moved for family, but I love the community," she explained in a recent interview. "It's one of those places where everyone knows and speaks to one another. And there are many artists and musicians, which makes this a highly cultured place to live."

THE central focus of the borough is the 105-student Roosevelt Elementary School for kindergarten through sixth grade. The entire borough attends its graduation ceremony, and its meeting rooms are used practically every night for community functions.

In the school foyer, next to an eight-foot-long green dragon painted by a first grade class, is one of the largest frescos in the United States -- the Ben Shahn Mural. It was painted by Shahn and his wife, Bernada Bryson, in 1937 under a grant from the Works Progress Administration, an agency that created employment during the Depression. The mural chronicles the history of immigration, labor reforms and the New Deal. Among the historic figures depicted in the painting are Albert Einstein and the labor organizer John L. Lewis.

The average class size is 14, and the school has a full-day kindergarten and after-school care. There is a state-of-the-art 16-station Macintosh computer laboratory, every classroom has Internet access and there is one computer for every 2.2 students, compared with a state average of one for every 5.9 students.

"We are like a private school, only we also have to meet state mandates," said the chief school administrator, Dale Weinbach.

Graduates of Roosevelt Elementary go on to middle school at the Melvin H. Kreps School and Hightstown High School, both in nearby East Windsor. On the 2000 College Board tests, the latest year for which data was available, students at the 1,187-student Hightstown High scored a combined verbal and mathematics average 1,044, compared with a state average of 1,012. On the 11th grade High School Proficiency Test, a statewide

standardized test that measures reading, 89 percent of Hightstown High students showed proficiency in all subjects, which was four points above the state average.

After painting their mural, the Shahns remained in Roosevelt and attracted other artists, including Jacob Landau and David Stone Martin. They, in turn, attracted singers, poets and playwrights, forming the core of an artist colony, which remains active today. Mr. Shahn is buried in the tiny Roosevelt Cemetery. Bernarda Bryson and their son Jonathan continue to live and work in Roosevelt. A large bust of F.D.R. by Jonathan Shahn stands outside the elementary school.

According to Professor David Brahinsky, treasurer of the Roosevelt Arts Project, which stages monthly events at the school or Borough Hall, about 40 accomplished artists, poets and writers currently reside in Roosevelt. The next event is a classical music performance by a local group called the Ellarslie Trio at Borough Hall next Saturday at 8 p.m. Contributions of \$6 for adults and \$4 for seniors and students are requested to support the program.

Roosevelt's small-town intellectual atmosphere comes at a hefty price. Its property tax rate is the highest of Monmouth County's 53 municipalities. Its water system is the original one built by the Department of the Interior and, according to Mayor Hamilton, the water tower is too small and the pipes are old.

The tax rate has split the town between those favoring development and those favoring preservation of open land. Roosevelt has about 620 acres of farmland, mainly at the northern end of town, just off Monmouth County Route 571. The 2000 election, which brought Mayor Hamilton to power, ousted a Borough Council that had passed legislation to allow a developer to build a development of 266 homes for people age 55 and older on 260 acres. The current council reversed that action and is being sued by the developer, U.S. Home, a unit of the Lennar Corporation.

Spearheading the preservationist camp is Fund for Roosevelt, an environmental organization started in 1999 to purchase farmland and place it under the protection of the state's Farmlands Preservation Program, which prohibits development but allows farming on the land. Dr. Rodham E. Tulloss, president of the Fund for Roosevelt, says his organization has raised \$77,000 in donations, then leveraged that money with state and county grants to purchase and protect 241 acres, most of which has been resold to farmers, except for the development rights.

One council person who was unseated was Rose D. Murphy, who had served for 10 years. "Not only are our taxes too high, but we have failing infrastructure, and pay an extra \$125 per month for water and sewer" beyond the taxes, she said. "Our water plant is in need of upgrading. Housing for senior citizens would have meant an expanded tax base without increasing our school taxes. In the current climate, when there is just no grant money out there, we need new ratables or our taxes will make living here unaffordable for many people."

Mayor Hamilton countered: "It would have changed the feeling of community and extended family. We have an integrated social fabric and that kind of development would have nearly doubled our population and impacted on sensitive environmental areas."