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Litchfield Hills Turning Blue

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FALLS VILLAGE -- In 1998, Jessica Helfand and her husband, William Drenttel, had a new graphic design partnership, a new baby and a new weekend house in the heart of the scenic Litchfield hills.

But their decision to join the vanguard of a migration that is rapidly transforming northwest Connecticut -- professional couples from New York moving their businesses to bucolic locales such as Salisbury, Kent and Cornwall -- had as much to do with their careers as the beauty of the landscapes.

"It wasn't simply that we found we were returning to the city for shorter and shorter weeks after relaxing weekends in the country," Helfand says. "We also realized that we were getting much more work done while we were here. I realized that I didn't need the distractions and high overhead of New York to be productive."

Helfand and Drenttel's Winterhouse Studio is now a thriving business with clients around the country, run out of a renovated artist's studio with a breathtaking view of a valley. Drenttel attributes their business freedom to the Internet and related communications - "cable access and the evolution of technology allows us to communicate with the world from this side of a mountain," he says.

That same Internet revolution is dramatically changing the demographics of the state's Northwest Corner in a way that many of the country's last accessible country locations - from the Ozarks to coastal Maine - are being transformed. One of the most notable consequences is that Litchfield County, just 15 years ago one of the state's most reliable Republican voting blocs, now leans heavily in favor of the Democrats and independent candidates.

"We have seen dramatic, creeping growth on every road we know around here," Drenttel says. "What was a rural, open land, beautiful paradise, is becoming incredibly gentrified because of the climbing real estate market. You can almost see the local people getting pushed out because of land values."

Much has been written about the impact of the Internet on modern life - the drawing away of the young from print, of retailing from brick-and-mortar stores, of entertainment from movies and television. But Litchfield County has become a vivid example of a new, geographic drawing away.

Wealthy professional sophisticates, from stock traders to advertising copywriters, who once relied almost exclusively on cities as their communications and meeting hubs are relocating in increasing numbers to the country.

And now demographers, planners and politicians concerned about those rural places are noticing considerable change that threatens the diverse mix of old blueblood estates, artists' and writers' colonies and dairy farms that once characterized areas like the Litchfield hills. While the outcome of this new influx of professionals with urban-sized incomes is not clear, these experts see a variety

of developments that might threaten the once relaxed lifestyle of the region.

"Some planning officials out here have begun to refer to this problem as creating a gilded ghetto," says Rick Lynn, planning director for the Litchfield Hills Council of Elected Officials. "It is no accident that in this area now, the three major issues are affordable housing, open space and jobs. As the area becomes more desirable to outsiders, home prices climb above what locals can afford, and there's more concern about open space by many of the newcomers."

Lynn and another regional planner, Dan McGuinness of the Northwestern Connecticut Council of Governments, recently compiled data from The Warren Group real estate data company that dramatically bear this out. Between 2000 and 2004, 13 Litchfield County towns had increases in the median sale prices of homes of more than 40 percent.

In Goshen, which even 15 years ago prided itself on being a rural, working enclave of dairy farmers and loggers, housing prices spiked 96 percent, to a median price of \$373,000. In Salisbury - always exclusive, but attractively clustered with affordable, Cape-style homes occupied by the teachers and groundskeepers at the town's four private schools - house prices climbed 67 percent between 2000 and 2004, to a median sale price of \$360,000.

These are median numbers, meaning that the most desirable homes now sell for much more than \$500,000, pricing the area out of the league of most natives.

The growth in eastern and western Litchfield County has separate origins. Towns such as Harwinton and Morris are booming as commuter communities closer to Hartford, particularly in the Farmington Valley, become too expensive for young families. On the western edge of the county along the Housatonic River, the natural beauty of the area is drawing independent business people such as Helfand and Drenttel, as well as relatively prosperous artists and writers. There has also been a rapid increase of retired couples moving full time to their former weekend homes.

David Grossman, the former budget director of New York City and a consultant who has worked extensively for the World Bank and USAID, moved to Cornwall full time in 1995 after owning a summer house in the community since 1980. He has prepared several reports for town officials and social agencies over the years on changing income levels, stay-at-home workers and weekenders. While the weekender population in Cornwall has continued to grow, Grossman says, from the 1990 Census to the 2000 Census, the number of people aged 20 to 45 shrank by nearly a fifth. This trend, Grossman says, was probably triggered by a combination of declining job opportunities and rising housing costs.

"In Cornwall, we had roughly 100 new houses in the last 10 years, but only 10 of these were occupied by year-rounders," Grossman says. "This has several effects, but most of the wealthier residents are paying only about 2 percent of their incomes for local property taxes, but lower-income people in town are paying up to 25 percent of their incomes in property taxes.

"Eventually, that has to chase out the people who can no longer afford to live here."

Changing Politics

The gradual transformation of the county's demographics has already dramatically changed the region's political makeup. As recently as 1992, Republicans dominated small hill towns such as Goshen, Kent and Salisbury. Sharon was the legendary preserve of conservative William F. Buckley's clan. Republicans were by far the dominant party, with 40 percent or more of the registered voters.

By last year, however, Republican registration had generally dropped to 25 percent, while unaffiliated voters had climbed to 40 percent. This had a big effect on the hotly contested 5th Congressional District election in 2006 between 24-year incumbent Republican Nancy Johnson and her Democratic opponent, state Sen. Chris Murphy. Throughout the 5th District, Murphy got 56 percent of the vote, and he received more than 50 percent in many Litchfield towns that Johnson had previously carried by wide margins.

"Every time you pick up the papers out here, the obituaries are filled with rock-ribbed Yankees whose families might have been here for generations," says Republican state Sen. Andrew Roraback of Goshen, who has represented Litchfield County House and Senate districts since 1994.

"The land transfer columns in the same papers are filled with urban refugees with progressive tendencies moving into the area. These newcomers inject a significant element of energy that's welcome, and the prism of political discourse inevitably evolves. I tell my fellow Republicans that you can't get elected here unless you're willing to pursue a moderate agenda."

Connecticut Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz says that in 2006, of 17,026 new voters registered in the 5th District, 34 percent were Democrats, 17 percent were Republicans and 48 percent were unaffiliated - reflecting a national trend that many political analysts say will produce a country of more than 50 percent unaffiliated voters within the next decade.

Dan Dwyer, a former press advance person for President Carter who now runs an antiquarian bookstore and website in Salisbury, moved to the area in 1986, and in 1992 came within 800 votes of unseating former Republican state Senate Majority Leader Adela Eads.

"When I first came into town in 1986, I had been a lifelong Democrat from Massachusetts and I proudly registered to vote as a Democrat," Dwyer says. "But I had lots of friends who registered as Republicans because that was the safer thing to do culturally. But today, no one who is cool registers as a Republican. That's the prevalent cultural value now - you register as an independent, but you certainly don't have to be embarrassed any more to be a Democrat."

Timothy Abbott of Canaan is director of The Litchfield Hills Greenprint Project, a joint endeavor of the Housatonic Valley Association and the Trust for Public Lands that promotes land conservation through a careful mapping of the county's developed and open lands. He says it's not so much the progressivism of new residents that changes an area, but the challenges they face once they move.

"What happens in towns that are transitioning from rural to quasi-rural areas is that the costs of services go up and there's a whole suite of regional issues that people have to face - responding to changes in the community requiring health care, preserving open space and protecting the quality of education," Abbott says. "All of a sudden people are more dissatisfied with what we're getting out of government now, and interested in getting more, which in my view is a Democratic-skewing trend."

Many of these changes are symbolized by what is believed to be the largest single building project in Litchfield County - a \$16.5 million expansion of the emergency room and obstetrics unit at Sharon Hospital. Hospital CEO Charlie Therrien studied the demographics and economic profile of the hospital's service area, which straddles Litchfield County and Dutchess County in neighboring New York state. Those studies show that the area's population is expected to grow by 4.5 percent by 2010 and that families with exceptionally high incomes - \$250,000 or more - will grow the fastest, while lower-income families will decline.

But income growth like this - which also produces escalating housing prices - produces as many headaches as new markets for Sharon Hospital. Nurses are forced to travel greater and greater distances to find affordable housing, and even higher-end employees find the area priced out of their reach.

"I describe this area as 'cosmopolitan rural,' because of the proximity of the many cultural advantages and getting to New York City, so that helps us recruit new talent," Therrien says. "But even doctors find the high cost of housing can be a deterrent to locating in the area, so there's a downside to all this attractiveness of Litchfield County."

"There is not a lot of housing and it is all high-priced."

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A discussion of this story with Courant Staff Writer Rinker Buck is scheduled to be shown on New England Cable News each hour Monday between 9 a.m. and noon.

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