

People are moving back to 'the core center' of Columbus

By ALVA JAMES-JOHNSON, September 1, 2014
ajjohnson@ledger-enquirer.com

Diane and Terry Karnes searched for the perfect home. They wanted a property not too far from work, but with enough land so they wouldn't feel cramped by their neighbors.

In April, the newlyweds found a 1,500-square-foot house and swimming pool, sitting on an acre lot in the Alta Vista neighborhood. So they sold Diane's townhouse on Old Moon Road and Terry's house in Waverly Hall, Ga., and moved to south Columbus.

"We looked at a lot of stuff, and when we saw this one, we both kind of said, 'Well, this is it!'" said Diane, 54, who works as an administrative assistant with the city's planning department. "The price was probably two-thirds of what we would've paid if we stayed in north Columbus. We just love our new home."

The Karneses' decision to live in south Columbus bucks the trend of northward expansion and is reflective of a recent shift that has been occurring in the Columbus real estate market: That is the movement of many families in north Columbus back to the city's central core.

Some are older residents looking to downsize, local real estate and neighborhood experts said. Others are young people who want to be closer to cultural and recreational venues like the Springer Opera House, Columbus State University and the Chattahoochee River. Then there are people, like the Karneses, who just want to reduce driving time and get more for their money.

Many are settling in areas such as Midtown and downtown Columbus, adding renewed vibrancy to some of the city's older neighborhoods, both north and south of Macon Road.

Anne King, executive director of Midtown Inc., said she gets calls every week from people looking for homes in Midtown. The area covers six square miles, bounded by Talbotton/Warm Springs Road and the Fall Line Trace on the north, Interstate 185 on the east, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard on the south and 10th Avenue on the west. It includes 24 neighborhoods, six national register historic districts and eight public parks.

King said the population is a microcosm of the ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural diversity in Columbus, and a lot of people find that appealing.

"We're finding that young people don't want to live in the suburbs like their parents did," she said. "The movement of young people in their 20s and 30s back to the core community is a

national trend, and we're seeing it here, too, which is really exciting. They want convenience, community and character and that's what areas like Midtown offer."

Fred Greene, property manager for Waddell Realty Co., said he has lived in downtown's historic district for 20 years and appreciates activities like the Saturday morning produce market on Broadway. He said his company has seen a surge in young families moving downtown and plans to open a satellite office there this month.

"I can't say that we get more calls than we do for other areas of town, but I will say the calls that we get for Uptown are absolutely increasing," he said. "There's a lot of excitement about all the great things that are happening like whitewater. And I think, just overall, people are interested in more of a neighborhood feel, where you know your neighbors, and you don't have to drive for entertainment. If you want to dine out, you walk out your front door, walk a block and you have dinner. It's a pretty exciting way to live."

Greene said areas such as downtown and Midtown appeal to people who like a sustained kind of living, where essentially everything they need is in a small area.

"It requires less driving, more walking, more riding bikes," he said. "I think, in general, it's people who just enjoy being outside and within walking distance of things they want to do."

North vs. South

Joseph Brannan, 31, said he grew up in the Castlewood neighborhood just north of Macon Road. He went to St. Anne-Pacelli Catholic School and then Auburn University. When he married his wife, Emily, in 2008, they moved farther north and bought a house off the Williams Road exit on I-185.

"Both sets of parents are from Columbus and live up in that area," he said. "Just had the generic thoughts about safety, good schools and things like that."

But Brannan's grandparents lived in Overlook, and he always liked the area. So two years ago, he and his wife purchased a foreclosed, four-bedroom house in the neighborhood and fixed it up. Brannan, who manages a group of radio stations for PMB Broadcasting, said he likes living near his office, which he can see from his backyard during the winter months. His wife works as a teacher at St. Luke School, and she also has a short commute. The home was built in 1945, and they live there with their three dachshunds.

Brannan said they have several friends who have moved to Midtown in recent years. Many are living around Lakebottom Park and in the Hilton Heights neighborhoods. They all like to participate in local activities such as the Uptown Concert Series and the Midtown Mingle.

"We love the proximity to work, and all that's going on in Uptown, and Midtown, it's very exciting to be around," Brannan said. "And there are a lot of dining options. My wife and I find ourselves eating out probably more than we should."

Brannan said some people didn't think it was wise to move south of Macon Road because of negative perceptions about crime, poverty and other issues.

"When Emily and I were purchasing this house in Overlook, our parents were concerned that it might not be safe and things like that," he said. "But, ironically, two days after we all had that conversation there was a robbery at that BB&T bank at the corner of Bradley Park and Whitesville Road. It was just kind of coincidental showing that crime happens anywhere and everywhere."

A pleasant surprise

Karnes said she grew up in east Columbus off Buena Vista Road in the 1960s and 1970s. When her family moved there, the area was still rural and in Muscogee County. She remembers the consolidation of the city government and when the area annexed into Columbus.

In the 1990s, Karnes moved to Macon Road, then to a neighborhood off Double Churches Road with her first husband.

"I was living in north Columbus when they first started widening Veterans Parkway and building the Publix in Bradley Park," she said. "There was nothing when we first moved out there. I was excited and thought, 'Oh, look, we're getting all this stuff.' Then soon it was, 'Oh my God, we're getting all this traffic.'"

Karnes said she and her current husband, Terry, were surprised when they found their house on an acre lot in Alta Vista. It was built in 1946 and is well-made, she said.

It has a lot of rooms and hardwood floors. Half of the lot is undeveloped, and she envisions possibly subdividing the property one day to build another house for a child or parent.

"Where I'm at now, 10 minutes in any direction, I could go anywhere I want to go," she said. "It's quiet, and I don't feel like I'm in the middle of the city, like I did on Old Moon Road."

She and her husband enjoy the house with their beagle, Abby, and they like their neighbors.

"Everybody speaks, but nobody bothers anybody," she said. "I mean it's wonderful."

Strengthening the core

King, a 35-year resident of the Midtown area, has been with MidTown Inc. since its inception. She said the organization, headed by Mayor Teresa Tomlinson before her election to office,

started as the Midtown Project in 2001. It was a grassroots effort to strengthen the city's core, which is essential for a healthy community, she said.

King said the area had a solid residential and business core, but there were signs of potential decline such as pockets of blight and under-utilized properties. The group, consisting of people who loved living in the area, wanted to address the problems before they became irreversible. So they began targeting older neighborhoods in both south and north Columbus for preservation.

"Our mission is to sustain and enhance neighborhoods and businesses within Midtown Columbus through education and advocacy with respect to community conservation and diversity," King said.

Olivia Pennington recently joined the MidTown Inc. board. She grew up in Hamilton, Ga., where her family had a long history. But as a child, she used to visit an older sister who lived near Lawyers Lane. That's when she fell in love with the Midtown area and decided she would live there one day.

"In the country, you lived in a community, but you were far from everything else," Pennington said. "When I visited my sister, we'd go to the Lakebottom Park area, and you can imagine as a child all the 'oohing and aahing.' I've always had a longing to reside in that area."

Pennington met her husband, Victor, in 1998. He was stationed at Fort Benning, and they married in 2000. The family spent seven years in Germany, and when they were moving back to Columbus, they searched online for homes in the Midtown area. In 2008, they found a three-story home on Eberhart Avenue and purchased it while still overseas.

The house has huge front porch with palatial white columns. In the back, the family spends time gardening and enjoying the outdoors. They also like being around friendly neighbors, and in a community with lots of diversity.

Pennington said she's glad her family finally has a place to call home.

"It's the perfect little spot for us," said the mother of four children. "All brick, from the first step to the last step. It's 86 years old. So we're chopping at the bits for four years to go by so we can actually say we live in a 90-year-old home."

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