# Goodbye city life: Litchfield County booming due to NY exodus

By **Kevin Zimmerman** - August 3, 2020

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When it comes to residential sales, it seems that New York City's loss is Litchfield County's gain.

"It's anything but business as usual," said Stacey Matthews, a sales vice president for William Raveis Real Estate's Washington Depot office. "Business is overwhelming — it's off the charts. We wake up to 20 to 50 new leads a day to manage. It's been 16-hour days for the last three months."

Edite Calabrese, sales/design consultant at the Belfonti Cos. — a Hamden firm that includes estate development and investment and property management — said that while Litchfield has been doing well for some time, "It's definitely become more so since COVID-19. Since that hit, there's been an increase in interest."

According to recently released data from the U.S. Postal Service, over 16,000 New Yorkers have left the state for suburban Connecticut since March.

Over 2,000 people have moved from New York to Litchfield County so far this year, compared with about 60 for the same period a year ago.

Michael Belfonti, founder, CEO and namesake of the Belfonti Cos., said he had heard the number of New Yorkers emigrating to the Nutmeg State could be as high as 20,000. “But it’s not just the pandemic,” he said. “It’s a general flight from the urban city environment, which has real problems with murders and crime.” Sixty-four people were shot and 11 killed, over the three-day July 4 weekend in Gotham, where police statistics found that murders are up 23% in the first six months of 2020 compared with the same period last year.

*A home on Lake Road in Warren, town in Litchfield County.*

And it’s not just New York City, civil unrest has also been seen in Atlanta, Chicago and a number of other major U.S. cities.

“There’s very much a feeling among New Yorkers of, ‘I have to get out of there,’” Belfonti said.

With a median household income of $78,314 in 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — less than Fairfield County’s $92,969 but more than the statewide $76,106 — Litchfield offers an attractive, luxurious destination that differs from hotspots such as Greenwich and the Hamptons, sites that Belfonti said can be more about being seen than comfort.

“You’re looking at a safe home that’s affordable — prices are in the high three’s to four’s for two-bedroom and three-bedroom units,” he said. “Litchfield itself is a beautiful town with great restaurants.

“And there’s no traffic to speak of and you don’t have to wait in line at the grocery store,” he said. “Try to get to the Hamptons on a Friday, and it can take you four to five hours on some weekends. I mean, who needs that?”

And while the county is home to such celebrities as Anderson Cooper (Bantam, a village in Litchfield), Meryl Streep (Salisbury), Daniel Day-Lewis (Roxbury) and Mia Farrow (Bridgewater), Belfonti noted, they are hardly the types to seek out the paparazzi.

Matthews estimated that some 95% of the Litchfield inquiries her office is seeing are coming from New York.

“They’re mostly people from the city,” she said. “I’ve heard there are some co-ops there now that are completely empty. There’s a growing number of people who do not want to be in the city anymore, and it’s not just because of COVID.”

She also said that the fabled “millennials want cities” theory that has been prevalent for the past several years may no longer be true. “There’s a whole new generation coming to this area,” she said. “People are absolutely loving it — they’re tripping over each other.”

Not that all the activity involves wholesale moves.

“There’s a fair amount of New Yorkers looking for weekend homes,” Matthews said. “But even that’s changing. Businesses in New York have realized they don’t necessarily need everybody in the office five days a week. Technology has really caught up to the point where a lot of employees don’t need to be in offices at all.” As a result, she said, “People are staying a lot more than weekends here. A lot of people who moved up to weekend houses are now here pretty much full time.”

Any house hitting the market for less than $1 million is subject to multiple offers, she said. “Even after they’re sold, we’ll still be getting inquiries (for a given property) for months. It went from being a buyers’ market to a sellers’ market overnight.”

Calabrese, who also works as director of sales and marketing at Belfonti’s Hunter’s Chase townhouse development in Litchfield, said she has been receiving inquiries from all age groups.

Units at Hunter’s Chase, consisting of three models — all with two-car garages — range from about 1,350 to 2,400 square feet and are priced at $369,000 to $409,900. Sixteen units are still available — five are under contract — and a second phase of 20 units could be added next summer.

**Temporary trend?**

Not everyone is convinced that the New York-to-Connecticut trend will have legs, however.

“I’ve never seen so many ‘deal pendings’ on realtor.com the whole time I’ve been in Litchfield County,” said Steven James. The CEO of Douglas Elliman’s New York City brokerage and director of sales for its East Side office, James has an apartment in the city and, for about 15 years, a weekend house in the county town of Washington.

James estimated that “about all” of the rentals and purchases since mid-March have been from Manhattan and Brooklyn. “People have been fleeing due to the pandemic,” he said. “The internet really helps when it comes to virtual shopping, and once you get here, it really is a pretty nice place.”

However, he added, “I think that after January 1 and into the spring, things that have unsettled people will probably be kind of settled. People want to do the right thing for their kids, which for many of them means going back to private school in the city.

“And they’re not going to give up their jobs in New York City,” James said. “Commuting is not so attractive from January to March. By then we’ll hopefully have a vaccine, the election will be over – things will be more settled.”

James said a similar flight from Gotham was seen in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks – as was its eventual reversal.

Even with many companies expressing satisfaction with the move to work-from-home, James said, “They’re probably going to want you back in the office. It’s a matter of chemistry, the sharing of information, of problem-solving, that you just don’t get with Zoom. And by next spring, a lot of people are going to be glad not to be remoting.”

For now, though, James said that Litchfield, Fairfield and even Westchester counties are benefiting from COVID consternation. “I’m even seeing a lot of deals pending in (one-time hot spot New Rochelle),” he said, “although there’s a lot of inventory there too.”

Both Belfonti and Matthews said that the county at large is doing well, though the towns of Litchfield and Washington Depot remain particularly hot. Five-star restaurants like Winvian Farm in Morris and the Mayflower Inn & Spa in Washington underscore the luxury aspect of the area, while the well-regarded Litchfield Performing Arts organization, while vineyards/wineries and a plethora of parks and other outdoor sites keep the rustic feel.

"People are enjoying it now, and that's before the restaurants and shops have completely reopened," Matthews said. "Then they're going to love it even more."

Still, she added, the area has become so popular that "We have a real problem – a need for listings."

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