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'Best-kept secret' town offers value for money

By MARK SHANAHAN, Portland Press Herald Writer

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GARDINER — With property values going up by about 18 percent a year in southern Maine, Patrick Rael knew it was a bad time to start house hunting. But Rael had a new baby girl and, finally, a tenured teaching position at Bowdoin College. After eight years of renting, he was ready to buy.



Staff photo by John Ewing
Gardiner's downtown features historic buildings and a streetscape that is pedestrian-friendly. The former mill town is 45 miles north of Portland.

It quickly became apparent to Rael and his wife that homes of any size and character would be out of their financial reach, at least in Greater Portland and the towns around Brunswick. There was no way they could swing the mortgage on a \$300,000 home, even at today's low interest rates.

So, like a growing number of people, Rael expanded his search to central Maine, hoping to find better value - and more house - for his money.

"We wound up in Gardiner," said Rael, who teaches history at Bowdoin. "Gardiner's got some beautiful old homes and some really great deals."

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As the white-hot real estate market multiplies home prices elsewhere, Gardiner - population 6,200 - is becoming an increasingly attractive, and affordable, alternative. The former mill town 45 miles north of Portland has an attractive main street, distinctive architecture and, importantly for people who have to commute to work, easy access to Interstate 95.

By central Maine standards, home prices in Gardiner are strong - in some cases twice their assessed value - but buyers still are getting bargains by southern Maine standards.

"We're getting big play from people living now in Brunswick and south," said Phil Barter, a real estate agent whose office is in Farmingdale. "It's a great market if you're a seller, but it's also great if you're a buyer."

Records on file in the assessor's office reveal that in just the past year, people have relocated to Gardiner from Brunswick, Gorham, Portland, South Portland, Yarmouth and Windham.

"I guess we're no longer Maine's best-kept secret," said Chris Paszyc, Gardiner's director of economic and community development. "We're being discovered."

Or rediscovered. In the 19th century, Gardiner was a thriving city, employing thousands of people building ships, making paper and stitching shoes. The legacy of those days is some terrific architecture, handsome Greek Revival, Victorian and Queen Anne homes clustered around a picturesque downtown park.

Gardiner's intact center - a rare thing in Maine since sprawl became the prevailing development pattern - also is appealing to many people. Water Street has won awards for its enchanting "streetscape" - planning jargon for trees, sidewalks, streetlights and benches - and passers-by enjoy watching the Cobbosseecontee Stream and Kennebec River roll past.

"The downtown compares very favorably to other 19th century main streets in its character," said Earle G. Shettleworth Jr., director of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and a longtime Gardiner resident. "It doesn't surprise me that people are coming here. . . . Gardiner's always been underestimated and undervalued."

Carla and Matthew Noyes moved to Gardiner last year. The couple - he's a graphic designer, she's a financial planner - sold their home in Yarmouth for \$265,000 (they paid \$171,000 five years ago) and bought a house in Gardiner for \$140,00.

The house, in a neighborhood of older homes close to downtown, has two one-bedroom rental units that will help cover the mortgage. The house is assessed at just \$75,900.

"We looked at places in Yarmouth that we wouldn't even want to live in that cost a lot more money," said Carla Noyes, who is



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commuting 25 minutes to her office in Yarmouth. "It was tough to find anything under \$300,000."

Living in Gardiner gets the family an hour closer to Sugarloaf, Noyes said, but not too far from Portland. She's also optimistic that the influx of new residents, many of whom are young professionals like herself, will lead to new cafes and restaurants downtown.

Rael, the Bowdoin professor, likewise is hoping that Gardiner will develop some of the amenities that attract people to places like Brunswick and Portland.

"Brunswick was probably our preferred location because of the bookstores, movie theaters and coffee shops," he said. "But we're banking on Gardiner going through something of a renaissance.

"And the housing market (in Brunswick) is crazy," Rael said. "It's more important to us right now to have a comfortable home and enough room for our daughter."

In the end, Rael and his wife settled on a Victorian farmhouse, built in 1855, with four bedrooms, two bathrooms, hardwood floors and new heating and plumbing systems. The couple paid \$141,000, much less than what a comparable property would have cost in Greater Portland.

City Manager Jeffrey Kobrock said all the interest in Gardiner is gratifying, and he expects it to last.

"As home prices have gone up in southern and coastal Maine, we've certainly seen some increased activity here," Kobrock said. "And people are getting very good value for their money."

Staff Writer Mark Shanahan can be contacted at 791-6363 or at:

mshanahan@pressherald.com

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