COMMUNITY PROFILE

Two large parks take one-third of Mountainside

By CYNTHIA HELLERMAN
Real Estate editor

Mountainside suffers from the same identity problem as much of the state: Too many people have only a passing acquaintance with it.

But the borough has tried to see to it that motorists passing by on Interstate 78 and Route 22 receive a favorable impression.

"The zoning regulations prohibit a lot of the commercialization in strips along Route 22," said Kathy Toland, who moved to Mountainside from Westfield four years ago. "No glaring neon lights. The zoning board and planning board are adhering strongly to past practices, keeping Mountainside very dignified."

Interstate 78 is surrounded by the woods of the Watchung Reservation as it slices through the borough, and there is a wooded buffer zone along much of Route 22 through Mountainside.

The trees seem to act as a sound barrier, creating a quiet atmosphere for the suburban streets beyond. It was this ambiance that led 35-year resident John Ekstedt to remain in the borough after he retired.

"It's a quiet town," Ekstedt said recently, while walking down Central Avenue. Although less than half a mile from the bustle of the highway, the only sound was the rustle of fallen leaves.

Mountainside may be one of the most densely wooded communities in Central Jersey. About one-third of the borough is parkland — the Watchung Reservation and Echo Lake Park. Almost all of the borough sits on a glacier bed that extended from Perth Amboy to Belvidere. In Colonial times, it was on the old Minisink Trail, which ran from Clay Pit Creek through Westfield to Branch Mills.

Mountainside broke away from Westfield in a taxpayer's revolt in 1895 as the last of several subdivisions of the large West Fields of Elizabethtown, created in 1791. Other towns that were part of the original municipality are Westfield, Plainfield, Cranford and Scotch Plains.

Residents in three sections of what was then northern Westfield — Long Grove, Branch Mills and Balltown — didn't want to pay taxes for services in Westfield such as street lights, sewers, fire and police protection.

Mountainside counts among its former residents a colorful 19th century counterfeiter named Henry Krawft, who specialized in $20 bills. He was so skilled, that when finally caught, he was offered a suspended sentence in exchange for designing legal money. He refused the offer and elected to spend six years in jail.

Mountainside is part of the Regional High School district with schools in Westfield, North Plainfield, Cranford and Scotch Plains.

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