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City tries to lure residents from D.C.

Washingtonians like charms of Bolton Hill; Prices here more reasonable

By Molly Knight

Sun Staff

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Baltimore is benefiting from a significant rise in real estate sales to Washingtonians. Nowhere is the trend more apparent than in [Bolton Hill](#), the quiet, leafy neighborhood northwest of downtown.

For years, Baltimore has tried to lure Washington house-hunters on the promise of an easy commute, tax credits and, of course, charm.

It's working.

"Just in the past three months we've seen a lot more interest in [Bolton Hill](#) from D.C. residents," said Dick Roszel, a real estate agent with Coldwell Banker. "And they're not only coming here to look -- they're actually buying. They didn't really think about Baltimore before. But now, it's become a viable option."

Don Davis, an agent with Long & Foster Realtors, agreed: "The secret is definitely out. More and more people [from Washington] are moving up here."

The secret: more for the money.

Although Baltimore housing prices are on the rise, they lag far below the price tags in desirable Washington neighborhoods like Georgetown, Dupont Circle and Capitol Hill -- and even in less glitzy neighborhoods. The median house price in [Bolton Hill](#) is about \$250,000, compared with about \$700,000 in the Washington area, according to city Realtors. In other words, Baltimore is a steal.

Ask Porter Davidson, who moved from Washington to Baltimore in December. Davidson and his partner, Tim Ring, sold their 3,000-square-foot house on a tree-lined block in Capitol Hill for \$550,000. For about \$250,000, they bought a 2,500-square-foot house on John Street in [Bolton Hill](#) with a carriage house behind it. With the money left from their sale, they purchased a beach house in [Rehoboth](#), Del.

"It was like getting two for one," said Davidson, who commutes on the Maryland Rail Commuter service train to his job in Washington.

Jake Boone, an agent with Hill & Co., called Baltimore prices "peanuts" compared with those in Washington.

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"That's why things are just getting snatched up," Boone said. "In the 26 years I've worked in real estate, I've never seen the market like this."

Although the market in [Bolton Hill](#) is booming, it's seen some rough spots in its 120-year history. First developed in the 1880s, the neighborhood -- 170 acres bounded by Mount Royal Avenue, Eutaw Place, Dolphin Street and North Avenue -- was built for upper-class residents. Some of its earliest homeowners were Johns Hopkins doctors, art collectors, lawyers, philanthropists and luminaries including Woodrow Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald. After the Civil War, it became populated with uprooted Southerners.

It wasn't until the 1950s that [Bolton Hill](#) saw its first decline, marked by the deterioration of some of its stately homes and the exodus of many longtime residents. But with the help of the Mount Royal Improvement Association, it bounced back.

Unlike the [Inner Harbor](#), [Bolton Hill](#) and Mount Vernon have not been the benefactors of large amounts of government funding.

Recently, however, the area has gotten several long-awaited economic jolts. The most talked about is the renovation of the former Women's Hospital (later a nursing home) at 140 W. Lafayette Ave. into a residence hall for students at the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#). Otherwise, [Bolton Hill](#) has come up slowly, but surely.

All of which begs the question, why now?

Some credit Baltimore's aggressive marketing efforts.

In April, the city launched an advertising campaign, backed by the Morris Goldseker Foundation, aimed at luring Washington commuters to [Bolton Hill](#) and Mount Vernon. For homebuyers pulled in by the campaign, the Maryland Transit Administration offered free, three-month passes on the MARC trains worth \$400.

The ads ran in Washington Metro stations and in D.C. newspapers. Their slogans, created by the nonprofit Live Baltimore Center, were clever enough to raise the eyebrows -- and awareness -- of Washingtonians.

"Happiness is measured in square feet," read one ad.

"You thought you'd never afford something this great in D.C. -- You were right," said another.

"The campaign has definitely turned the heads of Washingtonians to look at Baltimore on a bigger scale," said Will Backstrom, program director at Midtown Development Corp.

However, Backstrom added, the campaign can't take all the credit.

"A lot of this has happened because of word-of-mouth," he said.

Davidson agreed. Since he moved to Baltimore, his Washington friends have been asking him about more than how the Orioles are faring.

"People will pull me aside and ask me about moving to Baltimore," he said. "And I tell them that for inner-city living, it's great."

"[Bolton Hill](#) is as good as any urban Victorian neighborhood on the East Coast," said Backstrom. "And for many Washingtonians, it represents romantic -- and affordable -- city living."

Could 21217 become the city's hottest ZIP code for expatriate Washingtonians?

Perhaps. But only if there are enough houses to go around.

"There's absolutely no inventory in [Bolton Hill](#)," said David Martz, an agent with Long & Foster who has had four sales in the neighborhood in the past two years, all to Washingtonians. "If there's a decent house on the market, it's usually gone in less than a week."

Even if a [Bolton Hill](#) house is a "fixer-upper" that needs some work, its time on the market is typically short-lived.

Davidson's house, built in 1830, needed extensive renovations. But like most [Bolton Hill](#) residents who buy "handyman specials," he relishes the work in progress.

"It's an incredible experience," he said. "It's filled with challenges, but also with a sense of true accomplishment."

So what makes [Bolton Hill](#) so appealing?

In addition to prices, the neighborhood is an easy sell for Washingtonians who make the trip up to explore it.

Besides the proximity to the MARC trains, [Bolton Hill](#), with its blocks lined with well-tended Victorian houses, boasts all the characteristics of classic city living. It's racially diverse, politically active and within walking distance of the Lyric Theatre, Meyerhoff Symphony Hall and [The Charles Theatre](#). It's steeped with history and sprinkled with parks. And, although it's rough around its outer edges, it's considered a safe place to live.

When asked how they feel about the influx of new neighbors from the south, Realtors and residents of [Bolton Hill](#) are almost unanimous in their response. Bring 'em on, they say.

"It's like a shot of adrenaline," said Roszel. "It means great things for the neighborhood."

And for its new residents.

With his house almost fully renovated, Davidson said [Bolton Hill](#) was one of the best moves he and his partner could have made.


"Every few weeks we discover another amazing aspect of Baltimore," he said. "We have a great house in a beautiful and charming neighborhood."

As if that's not enough, they've also got the sand in their toes at [Rehoboth](#).


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