

The Good Life

The American dream — picket fence and all — is affordable here, and people are buying.

by **Robin L. Flanigan**

The median cost of a house in Rochester is nearly half the national average. The typical commute is about 20 minutes. Four of the top 100 public schools are in surrounding Monroe County. Such perks draw people in to this Lake Ontario city — and make them want to stay.

“It’s Rochester quicksand,” says Arunas Chesonis, CEO of telecommunications company Paetec. He’s watched numerous employees come back to town shortly after leaving for promotions in other cities.

And it’s enough to earn the Rochester metropolitan area a sixth-place finish in the latest *Places Rated Almanac*, which ranks the country’s top places to live based on ambience, housing, transportation, and other quality-of-life indicators.

The city’s rise from No. 30 in the previous edition can be attributed mostly to its affordable housing market. While real estate prices have skyrocketed in most of the country’s metropolitan areas, they have remained relatively stable in the Rochester region, where the median price of a home is \$121,800 — compared to \$224,900 nationwide.

There are more than 35 neighborhoods in the city alone, diverse in personality but unified in offering architecturally stunning homes — Queen Annes, Tudor revivals, and American foursquares among them — that date



A Queen Anne-style home in Pittsford, southeast of Rochester on the Erie Canal

back to the days when Rochester became a prosperous industrial destination. The suburbs are equally charming with historic villages, bustling commercial districts, and recreational opportunities along the Erie Canal. From the sidewalk eateries on Park Avenue to Ontario Beach Park in Charlotte, each neighborhood has “good roots, good family values,” says John Antetomaso, president of the Greater Rochester Association of Realtors.

Expectant parents Rafael and Pamela Vidal, wanting to be closer to family, moved back to the area in 2002 after a brief stint in New York City. They bought a 3,100-square-foot contemporary Cape Cod in Scottsville for about \$266,000, with a \$330,000 value after improvements — much less than the cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan.

“I wanted a house and a yard,” says Pamela Vidal. “I missed hearing lawnmowers and crickets and all of that. The difference is huge.”

An added bonus for the Vidals and their daughter, Morgan, now 4, was getting reacquainted with the area’s community pride. In an example of the “tighter network” they had been missing, residents helped create an outdoor art trail to complement the museums and galleries that dot the Neighborhood of the Arts, just east of downtown.

Several major projects mixing residential and retail space in and around downtown have come to fruition over the past four years, after spending up to 20 years on the drawing board. One of them is Corn Hill Landing, which overlooks the city skyline and the Genesee River in a neighborhood lined with Victorian homes. At least four others are in the works, including the Brooks Landing project, which will feature a hotel, shops, and office space across from the University of Rochester, as well as a boardwalk, boat docks, and historical markers along the river.

With numerous professional sports teams, plenty of four-season activities, and convenient access to the Finger



University Avenue boasts single-family homes and small shops in an eclectic mix of architecture, from Tudor to Victorian.



A Tudor-style home on Highland Avenue near Cobbs Hill Park in the southeastern part of the city



American foursquares on Brunswick Street, near leafy Park Avenue

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Lakes wine country, Rochester is a well-positioned player in the upstate market. Direct air service to 20 cities from Greater Rochester International Airport (plus service to Las Vegas beginning this summer) makes the city easily accessible.

Quality-of-life issues don't necessarily drive a company's decision to open its doors in a certain location, but they can edge out the competition should all other factors be equal, according to Staci Henning, marketing and public relations director for Greater Rochester Enterprise. That's what happened when pasta brand Barilla America, a division of Italy's largest food manufacturer, decided in 2006 to open its second U.S. plant in the Rochester area, citing the region's similarity to Barilla's hometown of Parma.

Says Henning: "It was that intangible aspect of the quality of life here that really helped tip the scale in our favor."



"The difference is huge" between bustling, expensive Manhattan and quiet, leafy Rochester, says Pamela Vidal (with husband, Rafael, and daughter, Morgan).

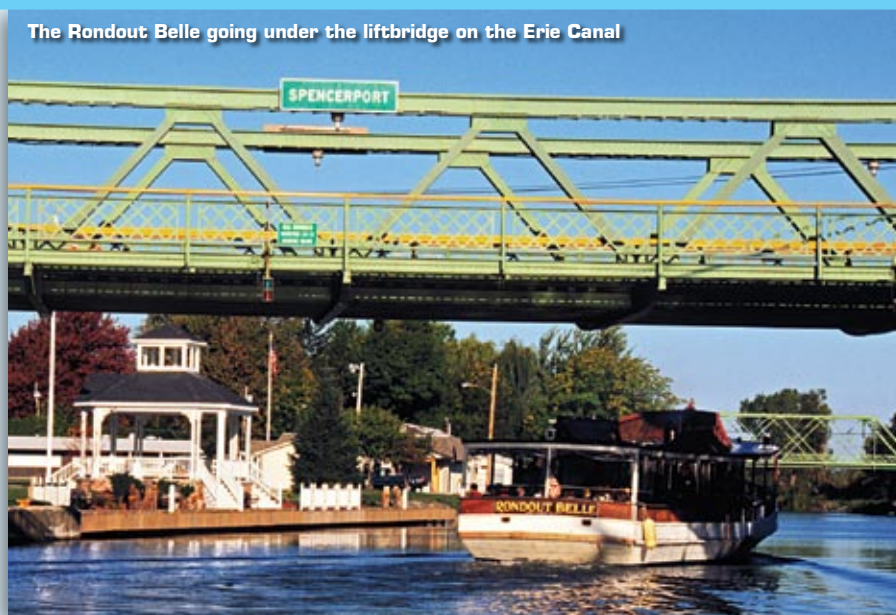
CONNECTED BY THE CANAL

Celebrated in song, the Erie Canal wends its way through several communities around Rochester that have spent recent years pumping money into attractions for tourists and residents.

In the village of Brockport, a visitors center was built two years ago to offer shower, laundry, and computer facilities for passing boaters who may need a break. Ushering the visitors into town keeps commerce vibrant.

"We understand that the viability of a community has a lot to do with downtown merchants," says Brockport Mayor Morton Wexler, who came to the college town as a student in 1953 and never left. "We help them out because it keeps them here."

In the village of Spencerport, an old trolley depot has been converted into a visitors center, library, and museum. A gazebo — the site of a summertime concert series — stands across the canal from a



The Rondout Belle going under the liftbridge on the Erie Canal

refurbished 19th-century pavilion. A small floating dock for launching kayaks and canoes was installed this spring, and there has been talk of a waterfront retail and housing complex.

The village of Fairport offers wireless

Internet capability around its 2,000-square-foot docking area, and the town of Perinton is planning more than \$1 million in improvements for boaters and park dwellers in the historic Bushnell's Basin neighborhood. — RLF

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BY THE NUMBERS

3 Bodies of water that touch Rochester: Lake Ontario, the Genesee River, and the Erie Canal

96 Height in feet of High Falls, where the Genesee River rushes over a cliff

350,000 People buried in picturesque Mount Hope Cemetery. Among them: Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, newspaper publisher Frank Gan-
nett, and Western Union founder Hiram Sibley

700 Weight in pounds of the 126-year-old copper "Winged Mercury" statue atop the Aqueduct Building

10 Years in a row Rochester-based grocer Wegmans has made *Fortune's* Top 100 Companies to Work For list

\$50 million Estimated economic impact of the Rochester International Jazz Festival in its first five years
— Compiled by Marian Cowhig

HAVING A WINE TIME

The Rochester area is becoming a showcase for specialty foods, thanks to the New York Wine & Culinary Center. The center, which opened last summer in Canandaigua with backing from Constellation Brands, Wegmans, the Rochester Institute of Technology, and the New York Wine and Grape Foundation, has so far showcased wines from more than 100 of the 230 wineries in New York State, pairing them with food produced by New York farmers in a special Taste of New York Lounge.

The idea for the center had been fermenting since 1999, when Constellation acquired Simi Winery and Chairman Richard Sands saw how wine tourism enlivened northern California. Simi had operated a visitors center in Healdsburg, California, since 1970. Sands resolved to bring the same experience to Rochester.

Now, visitors — some 90,000 of them since the opening — drop in to the New York Wine & Culinary Center for a tasting or a cooking class, or to book a seven-course gourmet dinner with a New York vintner. "You are at

that table with the winemaker for a very unique experience," says Alexa Gifford, executive director of the center. If visitors enjoy the wines they taste, they need only to step over to a special computer kiosk to order more right from its maker.

The center also is bringing an awareness of good food to New York's future gourmets: It hosts a summer camp for kids to educate them about how to grow and cook good food. — Virginia Citrano



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