

## **A Neighborhood of Colonials and Palm Trees**

**By JILL P. CAPUZZO**

**Published: May 11, 2007**

ANYONE who still considers St. Petersburg, Fla., the last stop before checking into a nursing home may be shocked by the transformation of this once sleepy Gulf Coast city. Construction cranes pierce the sky, topping off a series of new high-rise condominiums. Closer to the ground, daytime visitors tarry between art museums, a farmer's market and the waterfront park, while young professionals pack restaurants and clubs at night.

With 3,000 new housing units expected to be added to the city's stock over the next two years, St. Petersburg's skyline is undergoing big changes. All this development is generally seen as good news for St. Petersburg as a whole, and proving to be a particular boon to the neighborhood just north of downtown known as the Historic Old Northeast - Old Northeast for short.

This quiet residential neighborhood stuffed with old houses is the opposite of the happening downtown scene, which might just be its appeal. Those discovering this area, largely through word of mouth, say they love its sense of community while relishing the easy access to downtown.

"It just grows and grows on you," said Meg Higgs, who moved to Old Northeast four years ago from San Francisco. "It has a safe feeling. There are no traffic jams. Everybody gets to know each other."

Old Northeast has long been considered one of the city's most desirable neighborhoods for year-round residents, real estate agents say, but it has recently attracted empty nesters or semiretired buyers who see it as a good investment.

Harold Mindel, director of Click Models Management in New York, said that when he arrived in St. Petersburg a couple of years ago looking for a Southern getaway, he thought he'd buy a ranch or a condominium. But then he fell in love with Old Northeast, where he bought a 1925 Mediterranean revival for \$435,000.

"This area has always attracted a lot of Northeasterners," said Mr. Mindel, who has an apartment in Manhattan and a house in Asbury Park, N.J. "You've got palm trees mixed with old homes. It's just incredible."

Old Northeast runs from Fifth to 30th Avenues and Fourth Street to Tampa Bay. Created in 1911 by the land developers C. Perry Snell and J. C. Hamlett, the neighborhood features mostly single-family houses in a range of styles like colonial revival, Mediterranean and Craftsman-style bungalows.

Last year a neighborhood association tried to create a local historic district, but the campaign fell short of the necessary approval of two-thirds of the area's residents. Robin Reed, chairwoman of the neighborhood association's historic preservation committee, said some homeowners worried that the historic designation would be too restrictive. Preservationists are concerned about the growing number of smaller homes being torn down and older apartment buildings being replaced by condo developments.

"St. Petersburg for many years was a sleepy little place, and that preserved what we have here," Ms. Reed said. "But like many communities near the water, in these economic boom times, if someone wants to come in and tear down a little house, they can do it overnight."

## The Scene

With Tampa Bay, and the adjacent North Shore Park at neighborhood's eastern border, Old Northeast appeals to joggers, bikers and dog walkers.

The Higgs family chose St. Petersburg, in part, because of its burgeoning art scene. Eric Higgs is a sculptor. After first moving into one Craftsman-style house four years ago, the family traded up last winter to a grand Dutch colonial facing Tampa Bay, which they bought for \$1.35 million.

"Every block you're closer to the water, the better," said Ms. Higgs, who regularly takes her three sons to the park's beach.

The tightly knit community has the reputation for playing by its own rules - closing off roads for a street hockey game or a block party, and especially at Halloween.

Since buying a four-bedroom Mediterranean-style house for \$1.3 million two years ago, Bill Iacono said he and his partner, Greg Hill, spend almost all their time on the front porch. "Everyone is so friendly," said Mr. Iacono, a retired construction manager who spends summers in Rehoboth Beach, Del. "If somebody throws a party, they invite the whole neighborhood."

## Pros

With its eclectic architecture, brick streets, picket fences and lush foliage, the neighborhood offers an odd blend of New England style and tropical sensibility. Despite its residential nature, it is just north of St. Petersburg's downtown, making it convenient to the city's booming cultural and entertainment scene. It also offers easy access for out-of-towners, since it is just 20 minutes from Tampa International Airport.

## Cons

The recent growth in downtown St. Petersburg is increasingly encroaching on Old Northeast, whether it is the weekly events in the waterfront park that overflow into the neighborhood and clog the small streets and alleys with traffic, or the ever-growing pressure by developers to build there.

## The Real Estate Market

With the prices on the most luxurious new condominiums downtown climbing as high as \$6 million, properties in Old Northeast, and the more exclusive Snell Isle just across Coffee Pot Bayou, could still be considered relative bargains. Bungalow-style houses in the southern end of the district can list for as low as \$400,000. More typical is a 1925 Mediterranean-style stucco house with four bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms listed at \$774,900.

The more expensive houses are found on and near Beach Drive and Coffee Pot Boulevard or on Snell Isle, where a much photographed house, a 4,500-square-foot Spanish-style house built in 1928, is on the market for \$3.35 million.

As elsewhere in Florida, sales have slowed, according to Alona Dishy, an agent with Realty Executives in St. Petersburg, who said houses stay on the market for an average of six months. Price increases, once 30 to 35 percent a

year, now are at 10 to 12 percent in Old Northeast, Ms. Dishy said. She said that there are about 50 active listings in the neighborhood.

The lot sizes here are relatively small, either 60 feet by 110 feet or 50 feet by 127 feet. From bungalows to two-story homes, the average house size ranges from 1,800 to 2,400 square feet. Scattered among the older homes is a small selection of condominiums, from studio and one-bedroom apartments in renovated older buildings, listing for \$200,000 to \$300,000, to Vinoy Place, a four-tower development built in 2000 on Fifth Avenue Northeast, where units go for \$799,000 to \$3 million.

"We have people who buy here as their third, fourth or even fifth homes," Ms. Dishy said. "People who have a place in New York and one in Aspen. They'll use it now as a second home and may end up retiring here, but they want to get in before the prices go up."

That was the case for Jane and Tony Harwood, who were looking to trade in their winter vacation house in Coronado, Calif., for something closer to their home in Atlanta. They looked in Miami and Tampa before choosing a 1923 gray, wood-shingled house in Old Northeast, which Mrs. Harwood said reminded them of their summer house in Maine.

"We were looking for something historic and in a real neighborhood," Mrs. Harwood said. "We found this area to be more calm and contained. You can ride your bike anywhere."

### Lay of the Land

**POPULATION** About 7,800 residents live in the Historic Old Northeast neighborhood, according to the city. St. Petersburg's overall population is estimated at about 249,000 by the Census Bureau.

**SIZE** About 700 acres, according to the city.

**WHO'S BUYING** Unlike much of Florida's west coast, which traditionally draws from the Midwest, St. Petersburg's Old Northeast tends to attract buyers from the Northeast. The neighborhood also draws buyers from the Carolinas, Atlanta and other cities in Florida.