



Crazy for Cranford: New Yorkers won over by this New Jersey town's all-American charm

BY [CHRISTINE SPARTA](#)

Friday, May 21st 2010, 4:00 AM



Hands Schuh/News

Christine and Bill Dyer moved from the city in January.

For some, house hunting is like a whirlwind romance or dramatic breakup, but for Christine and [Bill Dyer](#), it was more like a long-drawn-out courtship. During their search, the former [Manhattan](#) residents managed to tour 45 [New Jersey](#) homes from [Essex](#) to Morris Counties.

After visiting places like Chatham, [Madison](#) and [Maplewood](#), they found their dream home, a \$560,000 Colonial in Cranford with four bedrooms and 1 ½ baths. Some of the elimination process boiled down to economics.

In [Essex County](#), they found steep taxes. They liked Cranford's neighbor [Westfield](#), a community with upscale stores like Lord & Taylor, but it didn't make sense financially. It was too expensive.

"You get more house for your money in Cranford," said [Christine Dyer](#), 32, who moved into the house with her husband in January.

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They were pleased that the home was in good shape, with hardwood floors and an updated bathroom and kitchen. Another selling point was the spacious family room, which will be the focal point of family life when they have children.

The Dyers work for [American Express](#) in lower Manhattan and were happy the door-to-door commute was little more than an hour by car or train. After spending nearly a decade in Manhattan, Christine was worried about the dining choices in this [Union County](#) township, but her fears were unfounded.

"I feel like I'm in the city again," she said about Cranford, which has a town center and plenty of ethnic food. Dyer, who spends half as much as she did in the city on groceries, is also happy to save money in the suburbs.

One of the sweetest surprises was the warm and welcoming neighbors. When the couple moved in, people in the community presented them with soup and flowers. On Super Bowl Sunday, they were invited to a neighborhood party — something less likely to happen in [New York](#), where the couple felt that even their next door neighbors were strangers.

Because of the affordable homes and friendly way of life, Manhattan residents often find a Cranford move a welcome life change.

"Cranford homes have a tendency to sell quickly," said [Donna L. Fabrizio](#), a realtor/associate with [Coldwell Banker](#) Residential Brokerage — West in Westfield, who sold the Dyers their home.

She said the center of Cranford is a big draw because it's easy to walk to restaurants, bars and transportation. She pointed out that not every New Jersey town has a center district, or it may be a less charming version, like a strip mall. Fabrizio reports the average price of smaller Colonials and split-levels in Cranford — those with three or four bedrooms and 1½ baths — can run around \$525,000. On the lower end, a townhouse with two bedrooms and one bath in an older building could fetch \$275,000.

On the higher side, a newly constructed single-family home with four bedrooms and 2 ½ baths could be found for \$825,000. Renters are likely to pay about \$1,200 for a one-bedroom, \$1,300 for a two-bedroom and \$1,600 for three bedrooms and two baths.

In 2004, when [Chris O'Brien](#) and his wife, Lisa, made the transition from [Brooklyn](#) to Cranford, just north of [Rahway](#), they fell in love with its small-town, Mayberry feel and laid-back place. After a childhood playing stickball in the street, he wanted grass, trees and a backyard for his future family — a brood that now includes Emma, 5; Aidan, 1, and a baby due in June.

The couple chose a \$410,000 [Cape Cod](#) with four bedrooms and two baths. He estimates the home to be worth \$500,000 today after improvements.

While the [O'Briens](#) toured homes in [Belleville](#) and [Plainfield](#), they were taken with the Cranford house's features, such as a fireplace and screened-in porch. The neighborly feel sealed the deal.

Like the Dyers, they received welcome gifts from neighbors, including a cake from a man who has become a good friend to O'Brien and helps him with yard work. He's glad the family moved to Cranford and vows, "I will never leave my block."

A good commute was also important to O'Brien, 38, who worked as a commodities trader in lower Manhattan at the time of his move. He has since taken a job in [Woodbridge](#), just 10 minutes away.

[Kathleen Miller Prunty](#), director of Cranford's [Downtown Management Corporation](#), said that living on a train line is a big plus.

"These towns are always desirable," she said. "People want to use public transportation for work or recreation, myself included. Bus service is also available to Manhattan." She has lived in the township for nearly three decades and has an easy time ticking off its strengths — lots of parks and bike paths and even a seasonal canoe club that attracts people from other towns. There is a newcomer's club to welcome people.

Nestled on the [Rahway River](#), Cranford was incorporated as a township in 1871. Miller Prunty said it was once known as the [Venice](#) of New Jersey because of its location on the waterway. Today, a 13.5-mile bicycle path runs near the township, which also has two public swimming pools. Cranford West, 60 miles west on [Silver Lake](#) in Hope, N.J., is a nine-acre campsite and recreation center open to town residents.

Miller Prunty is excited about new downtown developments like the nearly \$50 million

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project across from the train station. It will have 106 units of residential apartments, stores on the first floor, offices on the upper floors and a river walk. It will likely be completed by 2012.

“We do have some franchises,” she said. “But we’re a downtown that’s made of independent businesses.”

Cranford is also known for communitywide activities like the Scarecrow Stroll, which encourages residents and business owners to create personalized scarecrows. In June, there will be a five-day art event called “Paint the Town.” Artists will be stationed all over Cranford with their paints and brushes. An art show and sale will be held the last day of the event. Miller Prunty said it’s essential to hold events like these to attract people who might not normally visit the town.

Like every good small town, Cranford has its characters. [Joanie Reilly](#), owner of Joanie’s Cafe, is one. [The Bronx](#) transplant, a 35-year town resident, usually sports braids and is quick with wisecracks.

However, she gets sentimental when thinking of the kindness of local merchants when she opened two years ago, including a jeweler who gave her earrings. Reilly extends her generosity to the community by hosting bingo every Sunday so a diner can win a free meal.

“It’s a small-town [U.S.A.](#) feeling,” she said. “You grow up in it... you never leave.”


To get to Cranford, take the Raritan Valley line from [Penn Station](#). A one-way ticket is \$8, a monthly pass \$233. Express buses from the Port Authority Terminal are \$7.50 one-way.

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