

Winthrop: More coast, less cost: North Shore town offers inexpensive waterfront living

By Paul Restuccia
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Christopher Lopes always wanted an oceanfront Greater Boston home, but never thought he could afford one - until he discovered Winthrop.

Every time I have friends visit, they can't believe the deal we got," said Lopes, who recently teamed up with his girlfriend to buy a two-bedroom oceanfront Winthrop condo for just \$340,000. "This was a once-in-a-lifetime thing."

Located on a 1.6-square-mile peninsula at Boston Harbor's northern tip, Winthrop offers good housing values - partly due to its isolation and its closeness to Logan International Airport.

"Our prices are a lot lower than (Boston's)," said Jim Polino of Highland Real Estate. "Winthrop (flies) under the radar."

Starter condos in Winthrop's Governors Park complex list for as little as \$134,000, while the town's small Capes, cottages and bungalows start at under \$300,000.

Moving up the housing ladder, Seal Harbor - a 393-unit condo complex right on the ocean - has several units available starting \$400,000 each.

There are also newly built, three-bedroom oceanfront townhouses that cost around \$650,000 apiece, featuring high-end finishes and two-car garages.

For house buyers, Winthrop's Victorians, Queen Annes and other single-family homes currently list for an average of \$409,000, according to the MLS Property Information Network.

A lot of people still don't know about Winthrop - and if they do think of it, it's associated with the airport," said Century 21 Seacoast's Jan Stevens, who's lived in town for 28 years. "(But) there's a lot more to Winthrop than noise. There are a lot of reasonably priced properties here with great ocean and harbor views. It's like a little piece of Cape Cod only a few miles from Boston."

Once part of Boston, Winthrop was originally called "Pullen Point" because that's where Hub fishermen pulled their boats in from the water.

Early settlers divided the area into 15 parcels given to prominent Bostonians, including colonial Gov. John Winthrop, the town's namesake. (A 1637 house built by the governor's son still stands.)

Residents incorporated Winthrop as a separate town in 1852, and the community's seven miles of shoreline made it a popular summer resort in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Today, Winthrop retains the feel of a small New England coastal community, even though it's just five miles from downtown Boston.

Lobstermen still ply the local waters, while the Cottage Park, Winthrop and Elks yacht clubs have third- and fourth-generation members in a town where many locals own boats.

"Winthrop still has its old-fashioned mariner's charm," said Lopes, who grew up on Cape Cod and enjoys kayaking on the nearby Belle Isle Marsh Preserve. "The yacht clubs here aren't snotty, (but) are affordable to the average Joe."

Despite Winthrop's cozy feel, the Ted Williams Tunnel's 2003 opening cut drive times between the community and downtown Boston to less than 15 minutes.

Private and public bus lines also connect Winthrop with East Boston's Orient Heights Blue Line T station.

The combination of small-town atmosphere and easy downtown access is attracting a growing number of both empty nesters and young families.

Just ask Kevin Sheehan and his wife.

The couple moved to Winthrop a little more than a year ago, seeking a quiet place near the beach to raise their kids.

For \$385,000, the Sheehans bought a three-bedroom 1933 home just two houses down from Winthrop Harbor.

"We love it here because there's a real sense of community, and we wanted to stay close to the city," said Sheehan, 49.

Developers are taking notice.

The new 44-unit Atlantis Marina condo complex - Winthrop's first large development in a quarter century - is already half sold out.

Atlantis developer John Schwagerl bought a Winthrop waterfront house himself four years ago, and says he wouldn't live anywhere else.

"Winthrop is a throwback: a place where everybody knows everybody," said Schwagerl, whose company is already planning a second Winthrop condo complex. "It's old-fashioned - and that's how people like it. (When) I got to Winthrop, I felt like I was home."



Chris Lopes and Niki Bonnano recently bought a two-bedroom waterfront condo in Winthrop. (Herald photo by Tara Carvalho)