

Morton Grove: Easy to get to, easier on the wallet

Northwest Cook County suburb is rich with affordable homes, green space, recreational options

By Web Behrens
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It might not be Halloween yet, but with an autumn this chilly and wet, it's not too early to start thinking about snow. Multiple inches of dreaded frozen precipitation causes many in the Chicago area to fret, but not in Morton Grove: They're confident their streets will be plowed.

"Everything's so well-taken care of," says Myrtle Schwarz, who's lived in the north suburb since 1968. To illustrate her confidence in her village, she tells an anecdote about her neighbor, a doctor who works in downtown Chicago. "He was commuting home one horrible snowy day [a few years ago]," she says, "and he told me, when he got off at the [Edens] expressway at Dempster, he said to himself, 'Now I know I'm in Morton Grove, because here, the minute there's a drop of snow, it is removed.' They are so good about that!"

Nicholas Marino, the broker/owner of Century 21 Marino Realtors in Morton Grove, echoes that sentiment: "I'm telling you, in the wintertime, every street and every alley is plowed. You don't have to worry about it; it's done. They really excel at public works here."

In a region known for its harsh winters, efficient snow removal might be reason enough to move to Morton Grove, which is home to about 22,500 people. Residents here cite a number of other pluses, chief among them the city's location -- 13 miles north of the Loop -- as well as affordability and the large ratio of park land to commercial and residential space.

"It's accessible to everything. That's why a lot of people like this town," says Schwarz. If driving downtown on Interstate Highway 94 -- a quick enough jaunt without traffic, but not so appealing during rush hours -- doesn't sound ideal, there are other options. Metra's Milwaukee District/North Line runs right through town; it's also relatively simple to connect to the CTA via the Yellow Line, which terminates in Skokie, directly to the east.

A Chicago native, Schwarz and her husband moved into a ranch home typical for the area more than 40 years ago, with both of their children attending grammar school in Morton Grove. Still very contented with where she lives, the 82-year-old Schwarz praises both the city services and the community pride that keeps her neighbors taking care of their homes. Of the many changes she's seen, she can only identify two recent ones that sadden her. "A lot of stores are closing because of the economy; I imagine that's about the same as anyplace else," she says. "And all these big monster houses have moved in. Many of those are just sitting there with a big wrought iron fence around them. They stick out like sore thumbs amongst all our little ranch houses."

"We're very much a single-family type of community," says Realtor Marino. Historically, most of the houses in Morton Grove were "typical ranches, small split-levels. The new homes that have been built in the last few years

have been some of the more luxurious homes, with 4 or 5 bedrooms. . . . They top out about a million. There's a fair amount of condominiums . . . developed in the last few years, mainly in the older section of town, which is now being redeveloped."

The average sales price for a Morton Grove home during the first three quarters of this year, Marino reports, was about \$300,000. With "probably the best value for housing you'll find anywhere in this area, Morton Grove is the most affordable of the North Shore suburbs," he said, grouping the landlocked Morton Grove in with those typically more affluent burbs that line the lakeshore.

Affordability is a selling point for Morton Grove, agrees Tsultim Ngabtak, owner of Good Karma Construction Corp., which specializes in eco-friendly residential and commercial construction. Ngabtak founded Good Karma in 2002 in Evanston, and moved his business and his family to Morton Grove in 2005. His two youngest sons attend Morton Grove schools, "and I have found them to provide a great environment for my children," he says. Meanwhile, with work projects spread throughout Chicago and all around the North Shore, "being located in here makes it easy to access the city as well as the suburbs."

Morton Grove's park districts are another selling point for many residents, which makes sense considering about 20 percent of the suburb is devoted to open spaces. "I think that's what makes us unique from other suburbs. You can't go more than a few feet without bumping into a tree," says Catherine Peters, 55. "There's canoe access, bike trails. And the park district has opportunities for all ages, from kids' stuff to ballroom dancing."

For her part, Peters takes advantage of all the green space by going riding. She and her husband own two horses, and "I ride them in the woods all the time," she says. She boards her horses at nearby Freedom Woods Equestrian Center, home to about 85 horses. About 30 of them are lesson horses. "We see a lot of younger

families now," says assistant manager Russell Lee, "so I teach kids how to ride."

While there's no shortage of family-friendly activities, "there's not really a nightlife in Morton Grove," says Schwarz. She adds with a laugh, "The nightlife used to be at our house, but that was many years ago." The city doesn't have its own cinema; residents often head to the multiplexes at one of two nearby malls: Old Orchard in Skokie or Golf Mill in Niles. As for eating out, "We have a few casual restaurants," Marino says. "We don't have a lot of fancy restaurants. Old Orchard has some fancy restaurants, and that's where we sort of lose out."

Still, the growing racial and religious diversity in the village translates into a wider range of dining options. "When I was a child, it was mainly German and Italian [families]," Peters says. "Now there's every race, every background, every nationality. So there's a lot more diversity in the kind of food you can find in Morton Grove. . . . We have a large East Asian population and a growing Muslim population."

"We've got a little of everything around here, from Polish to Irish to Indian," says Schwarz. "We have very nice neighbors, and always have had. All the homes are well-kept. It's a very clean town. I really can't imagine what else you could wish for."

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