

If-You're Thinking of Living in:

By RACHELLE GARBARINE

THE business district of Mountainside straddles busy Route 22. But down a series of wooded back roads in this Union County borough lies another world, a rustic preserve of homes terraced on the Watchung mountains.

Almost half of the Watchung Reservation's 1,945 acres and most of the 147-acre Echo Lake Park, with its three large lakes, lie within the borough's borders — making nearly a third of its four square miles parkland.

"It's like entering a different world, serene and pretty," said Gerard Gallagher, who with his wife, Madeleine, has lived in Mountainside for 20 years except for a brief job transfer to Washington in 1981.

"When we came back it was like coming home again," he said.

In Mountainside, the pace is unhurried and customs are a bit old-fashioned, by choice. Sidewalks and street lights are rare, the grocer makes home deliveries and people turn out in force for the annual Little League parade. And although many residents liken the borough to an isolated country hamlet, they revel in the fact that from their perch they can see Manhattan just 24 miles away.

In the 1970's, to ease traffic on Route 22, the state's Department of Transportation wanted to build a cloverleaf at New Providence Road, the borough's busiest intersection. But residents, who saw it as an intrusion on their tranquil setting, protested. The cloverleaf was not built.

Today, traveling to Manhattan along the old four-lane road can be exhausting, and congestion at the New Providence Road intersection has increased. The borough is considering petitioning the state to install a left-turn signal there.

Mountainside is more than just a pretty place. It has the Children's Specialized Hospital, and some 300 light industrial and commercial businesses, most of them along Route 22. As a result, the borough's tax rate, at \$2.22 per \$100 of assessed value, is among the lowest in Union County, Mayor Robert S. Vigilanti said.

But strict zoning established three decades ago has kept the borough's 2.7-mile stretch of Route 22 free of fast-food chains and car dealerships. "When developers challenged the zoning," Mr. Vigilanti said, "the issue went to court and we won."

Stability has been Mountainside's hallmark since it broke from neighboring Westfield to become an independent bor-

Mountainside



The New York Times/Frank C. Dougherty

Mountainside residents at one of the three lakes in Echo Lake Park, a 147-acre recreation area.

ough in 1885. Until the 1950's its population hovered around 2,000 and development was slow.

But the decade that followed brought the community's greatest expansion, turning it from farmland to suburb. By the 1970's, Mountainside was almost fully developed, and in recent years only a dozen or so houses a year have been built, all on scattered lots, said James L. Roberts, the Borough Administrator.

There are only single-family homes — from Cape Cods to expansive split-levels and ranches — along the maze of streets that wind through the community, and no two are alike. But they are expensive, and prices rise in relation to the elevation.

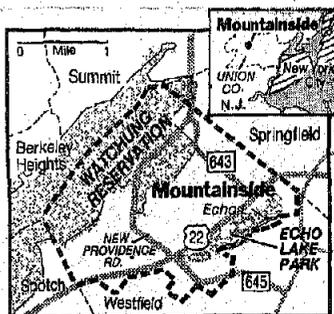
Typically, older houses on 100- by 100-foot lots cradled in the valley start at \$183,000, while larger ones with more land on higher ground are priced from \$255,000 to \$325,000, said Frank J. Thiel, who owns a local real estate agency. Hilltop homes along Puddingstone and Ridge Drives begin at \$350,000, he said, adding that those with views of the New York skyline or yards that back up to the Watchung Reservation can command as much as \$1 million.

There are no condominiums or rental apartments, though a few houses can be rented for \$1,400 or so a month. While the community is obliged to provide 198 housing units for low- and moderate-income families under the State Supreme Court's Mount Laurel ruling, Mr. Roberts said developers had yet to propose building them on the limited land available.

Such costly housing stock has drawbacks. Because Mountainside feels its population is aging — the 1980 census found 1,371 of the 7,118 residents were 60 years old or older — Mayor Vigilanti said the borough is exploring the need to build multifamily housing for the elderly.

Still, Mountainside continues to attract new residents, and the most recent arrivals have been young professional couples with children, willing to pay the rising cost of admission. Longtime residents say the newcomers are welcome.

"Living in Mountainside is like having a little piece of country all to yourself," said Lynn Stoloff, a resident for two-and-



a-half years. "And it's convenient. Whatever you need is either right here or within a 10-minute drive."

Families are also drawn to the community because of its attention to education. Many youngsters attend Deerfield School, the borough's only elementary school, and continue their studies at Jonathan Dayton High School in nearby Springfield, part of the Union County Regional High School District. Vail-Deane School, a private school covering kindergarten to 12th grade, and Our Lady of Lourdes, a Roman Catholic elementary school, are also in Mountainside.

THE Superintendent at Deerfield School, Leonard J. Baccaro, said its small classes, averaging 17 students, and a veteran teaching staff promote individualized study, focusing on basic skills complemented by such courses as industrial arts and vocal music instruction, starting in kindergarten. The school also has a "transit program" to help children prepare for kindergarten.

Jonathan Dayton High School, with 739 students, offers diverse academic and business courses, ranging from social study classes on the Holocaust and on Russian and Japanese cultures to instruction in Hebrew and a work-study program. The school also has graphic arts and cabinetmaking programs.

About 80 percent of the graduating seniors go on to higher education, said Donald A. Merachnik, the high school district

superintendent, adding that this year three students were named National Merit Scholarship finalists.

Most of the Mountainside's social and civic organizations are associated with the school or the borough's three churches, the oldest of which, Mountainside Union Chapel, was built in 1801. There are also such annual holiday events as a Fourth of July picnic and a Memorial Day parade to promote community spirit, which some residents feel has faded in recent years because of declining school enrollment and changing demographics. Mr. Roberts said the borough was investigating ways to reverse that trend.

The Watchung Reservation and its woodland nature trails are a major recreational resource for the borough. Echo Lake Park offers fishing and boating and free concerts on summer evenings. Residents can also join the community swimming club at the pool near Borough Hall, where a season pass for a family costs \$130. Next to the pool are softball fields and tennis and basketball courts and a jogging trail. The borough also provides organized sports and other activities and its 50,000-volume public library sponsors story hours for children.

The community has a two-block shopping area along Mountain Avenue, where a dozen neighborhood stores offer most necessities. Otherwise, shopping is available on Route 22, where there are many restaurants. Among them are Dasti's Mountainside Inn, offering Italian and seafood specialties, and L'Affaire 22, serving French cuisine.

There is a lingering sense of the past in Mountainside, which was settled by Dutch and English farmers in the 17th century, and it is reflected in the vintage residences.

One of the oldest, the Deacon Andrew Hetfield House, built in 1755, was saved from demolition three years ago when the borough moved it at a cost of \$60,000 from Route 22 to land it owns next to the library on Constitution Plaza a half-mile away.

It is being renovated for use as a community center. The living room and kitchen will be restored to period decor and opened to the public.

Gazetteer

Population: 7,078 (1986 estimate)

Median family income: \$35,659 (1980 census)

Median house price: \$350,000

Property taxes on median house: \$3,576

Public school expenditure per pupil: \$7,200 elementary; \$8,000 secondary

Distance from midtown Manhattan: 24 miles

Rush-hour commutation to midtown:

New Jersey Transit bus, 56 minutes to Port Authority Bus Terminal; \$3.85 one way; \$108 monthly

Government: Mayor (Robert F. Vigilanti, a Republican) and six-member council elected to four- and three-year terms respectively. Council appoints Borough Administrator, now James L. Roberts

Discovering Nature: The Trailside Nature and Science Center, opened in 1941 off Coles Avenue in the Watchung Reservation, includes a planetarium, an exhibit of 22 indigenous snakes and a museum with a butterfly garden, fossils, a weather station and samplings of minerals found in the state