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## Buying Into Baltimore

Washington Transplants Are Streaming North to Grab Budget Prices

By Eugene L. Meyer  
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To hear Falita Liles talk, you would think she had died and gone to heaven. But all the University of the District of Columbia librarian has done is move from Washington to Baltimore.

Thousands of Washingtonians each year are moving north from the Capital City to Charm City, attracted by cheaper housing, ethnic neighborhoods and urban amenities they say are lacking here. The ex-Washingtonians have leveraged the appreciation on their D.C. homes to buy larger and, they say, live better in Baltimore.

The migration has been aided by Live Baltimore, a largely city-funded nonprofit that since April 2002 has spent about \$350,000 to market Baltimore to Washingtonians, quietly luring prospects with nearly monthly free happy hours in and around the District.

The message is simple: Hello, D.C. Balmer wants you! Ditch the hip, high-priced District and its trendy, almost-as-pricey inner suburbs. Say goodbye to Ballston, hello to Bolton Hill. Adios, Capitol Hill. Federal Hill awaits you. So long, Mount Pleasant. Hello, Mount Washington.

Statistics are telling. This year through June, the average price of a home sold in Baltimore was \$170,000, compared with \$532,033 in the District. A four-bedroom house in Baltimore averaged \$273,000, compared with \$1,098,500 in Washington. Small, attached houses of two or fewer bedrooms cost an average in \$183,505 in Baltimore and \$417,540 in the District, all according to numbers from Metropolitan Regional Information Systems, the region's real estate multiple listing service.

In his 2003 inaugural address, D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) set a lofty goal of 100,000 new city residents, but the population -- 558,010 by the latest count -- keeps going south, or, er, north.

Baltimore's population, 632,214, isn't what it used to be, either. However, Mayor Martin O'Malley (D) claims to have all but halted the decline. D.C. ex-pats are part of the reason. In 2004, the most recent year for which figures are available, 6,931 people -- 40 percent of those who left the city -- moved to Baltimore, making the city the leading destination for departing Washingtonians.

"It's absolutely delightful," Liles gushed. "You're less likely to hear 'what do you do for a living' and people caring about your bank account. It's so much cheaper than D.C. It's very walkable, unlike my old neighborhood, where there was nothing to walk to."

Liles, 39, lives on South Madeira, a narrow street ("It's so European") of two-story rowhouses in the East Baltimore neighborhood of Butchers Hill. A family from Rockville lives across the street.

Around one corner is a Polish American bar. Around another is Salt, a hip new restaurant. Liles lives about a block from 106-acre Patterson Park. Fells Point, with its shops and nightspots, is a 10-minute walk, the reviving neighborhood of Canton 15 minutes.

Liles moved in December from a 612-square-foot condo near the Rhode Island Avenue Metro station. She got \$220,000 for the unit, for which she had paid \$160,000 just two years earlier. Her larger, though still smallish, Baltimore rowhouse

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cost her \$219,000.

Like many of the newcomers, she had been to a Live Baltimore event in Washington, where she met O'Malley. "He was showing me various libraries," she recalled. "I definitely started mulling, getting some Baltimore Zip codes, doing some play [Internet] searches."

She found a real estate agent and then a condo in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood, near the train station, but it was sold before she had a chance to bid. "I said that does it, I'm getting my [butt] to Baltimore."

To reach her job at the University of the District of Columbia, she sometimes drives and "when I'm working normal hours" takes the train, driving 10 minutes to MARC's West Baltimore station, riding to Union Station, then taking the Metro Red line to work -- a little more than an hour.

"I used to think Baltimore was the backwoods, with nothing to do," she said. "I swore I'd never leave D.C., and now here I am in Baltimore."

According to Live Baltimore, about 24 percent of those moving to the city are coming from Washington, compared with half of that before the campaign began. Its monthly happy hours are a relaxed blend of marketing and mixing. As added incentives, raffle prizes have included \$10,000 down payments and \$250 towards home inspections.

One happy hour in February, at Ozio on M Street NW, drew 153 people. "We have high-rise condos starting in the low 200s, and you can see the water," Tracy Gosson, Live Baltimore's executive director, told the crowd. "Who's giving away \$10,000 in D.C.? No, I didn't think so." The occasional grumble from former Washingtonians, she said later, is about lackluster train service to the District, not about Baltimore itself.

To lure people to its events, Live Baltimore does low-budget advertising. "It's better in Baltimore," boasted one of its ads in Express, the Washington Post-owned free newspaper ubiquitous on the Metro.

Another Express ad, this one promoting a Greenbelt event in May, showed President Bush saying, "NSA phone records indicate you're making a lot of calls to Baltimore. . . . Why Don't You Just Move Here?"

That gathering, at Jasper's, drew a smaller crowd of 53 people. Chris Mundy was there, at his third such event, pitching 1209 North Charles, a condominium development in the Mount Vernon neighborhood. "It's good networking for prospective buyers," said Mundy, sales director for the condo. "We've gotten some people through the doors to put contracts down."

Mundy, meanwhile, commutes to Baltimore from his home in Fairfax County. It's a long commute, he said. Would he consider moving? "It might happen," he said. "Some friends have begun to look. When you compare it to D.C., you know, you can find much more competitive prices there."

Or, as Gosson put it, in Baltimore, "It's Chevy Chase at a price that's Anacostia."

LaTonya Parker, 35, moved from east of the Anacostia to Bolton Hill last August, after adding herself to Live Baltimore's 9,000-name e-mail list. She continues to work in Silver Spring for Discovery Communications, commuting 40 minutes each way by car. A native Washingtonian, she owned a condo in Northeast and wanted more space.

"I couldn't afford anything bigger in the city and still wanted to live in a city, so I chose Baltimore," she said. "At first, it was a little difficult; it wasn't as familiar. I continued to go to restaurants, clubs in D.C. because I didn't know where to go. Now I hang out in Mount Vernon; it's kind of like a Capitol Hill area, with lot of boutiques, restaurants, very trendy."

She's renting out her two-bedroom condo in Washington, while living in the six-year-old, three-bedroom townhouse she bought for \$230,000.

Her family wasn't happy about her move. "They weren't that familiar with Baltimore," she said. "Though it's less than an

hour away, they felt it was worlds away. And because they didn't have family in Baltimore, they were worried about someone keeping eye on me. They had a lot of fears.

"When they saw the house and neighborhood, they felt little better. Now they even come to visit me. Before I'd have to come back to D.C. Now they love the neighborhood."

Parker, who grew up in Prince George's County, has an undergraduate degree from Howard University and a master's from American University. "I still consider myself a Washingtonian. I think I always will be," she said.

John Campagna is also a native Washingtonian, as he says, "born and raised, bred, steeped in D.C." Now he and his wife, Vivian, an Alabaman who moved to the District from New York, are Baltimoreans.

Their 1906 Victorian house in the District's Palisades neighborhood had appreciated 60 percent in three years; they sold it last year for \$725,000. They paid \$389,000 for their Baltimore house, which is 50 percent larger.

Campagna, 45, a stockbroker, already had Baltimore clients, which meant he drove up occasionally. "We had friends who'd moved up from the D.C. area to Federal Hill and were raving about it," he said. He began scouting neighborhoods, checked out the Live Baltimore Web site and took one of the group's semiannual neighborhood bus tours.

Campagna still commutes two or three times a week -- a 90-minute trip that includes light rail, train and Metro. Driving can be problematic, with two-hour trips when traffic is bad. However, Campagna also has clients and an office in Baltimore, which helps.

The Campagnas live on Falls Road in the Mount Washington neighborhood, in a former millworker's house. The old mill, within walking distance, has a Whole Foods and a [Starbucks](#). Their 1900 home is five or six houses inside the Baltimore city line -- "a close-in suburb," he said.

"I love how colorful Baltimore is," said Vivian Campagna, 34, a former Joffrey ballet dancer, and mother of Lila, eight months. "I loved living in D.C., but people are very real here. We like that it's rough around the edges. I think it's great people still smoke in Baltimore and you see people with tattoos, not trendy kids but part of the culture."

There is, amid all the exultation over moving to Baltimore, not a sense of loss over leaving Washington but one of slight foreboding, a fear that the increasing presence of Washingtonians could cause a change for the worse. Said John Campagna, "I hope we don't ruin it by moving up here."

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