WITH ITS BEAUTIFUL VICTORIANS AND REASONABLE PRICES, THE CONDO MARKET IS BOOMING IN BOSTON'S OLDEST NEIGHBORHOOD

BY MICHELE R. MCPHEE

Queen Anne Victorian homes line the streets of upscale Wellesley Park.
ONE TIME, DORCHESTER WAS INFAMOUS, at least among some of Boston's snobbier Brahmins, for two things: Irish pubs and violent crime. The crime has long since diminished and these days is confined largely to a square-mile pocket known as the Morton/Talbot Corridor, which links Dorchester to Mattapan. Irish pubs still flourish, but most now are of the lofty, open-air variety, more likely to serve filet mignon than the traditional blood sausage. And with new condos being built in sprawling mansard Victorian homes that bounce kaleidoscopic light from stained glass windows onto tree-lined streets, and old triple-deckers being converted into six-room lofts, Dorchester is fast becoming the city's hottest up-and-coming real estate market.

Boston's oldest and largest neighborhood—it was founded months before the city itself—Dorchester was once an area defined by parishes, people referred to their home not by neighborhood, but by which Catholic Church their family belonged to. Lifelong resident Ed Regal, 47, a youth hockey and baseball coach and political activist, puts it this way: "I was born in St. Kevin's, raised in St. Peter's, married in St. William's, had all my kids in St. Mark's, and finally bought a house on the St. Brendan/St. Anne's line. I'll end up at St. Gregory's when they put me in Cedar Grove [cemetery]," he says.

Now, residents have given burgeoning neighborhoods kooky names, like Meeting House Hill, and expanded established neighborhoods, like Savin Hill, well beyond their old geographic boundaries. And, unsurprisingly, given so many real estate success stories, the gay community had a hand in paving the way for Dorchester's rapid rise. But it's not only the affordable and desirable housing stock that's making Dorchester the latest hot spot. Many sections are linked to Boston by the MBTA's Red Line, and the neighborhood is also home to the University of Massachusetts/Boston, one of the city's most vibrant campuses, and the vaunted John F. Kennedy Library. Some of the lovely sandy stretches along the Neponset River—Malden Beach, Tenean Beach (once infamous as a place where fugitive gangster James "Whitey" Bulger buried the bodies of his victims) and Victory Road Park—boast brand-new boardwalks, shiny playgrounds and views of Dorchester Bay with its landmark gas tanks painted inGayola-bright splashes by the artist Cotye. Dorchester is also home to several artists' spaces, including Pearl Street Studios, and some of the best eateries in the city, like 224 Boston Street, the homey restaurant whose name makes it easy to find.

"Doc," as the neighborhood is often known, has proven more welcoming than South Boston, another area that's seen a boom of condo dwellers raising real estate prices. When the upwardly mobile invaded the turf of the entrenched Irish families in Southie, the phrase "Yuppies Go Home" famously appeared in primitive black paint on a billboard on Broadway. In contrast, some Dorchester enclaves, like Melville Park in Fields Corner, welcome newcomers with gift baskets from the neighborhood association that include a "DOT" bumper sticker.

No one calls it "Die-chester" anymore.
“It’s amazing,” says Ken Ozierow, owner of Dorchester-based At Home Real Estate Group. “Dorchester is the most sought-after area right now. The condo market is absolutely booming. There are 150 to 200 new condos on the market. The prices are at the peak. They’ve never been higher.”

Ozierow started his company five years ago with just one employee: himself. He now has 20 realtors showing properties all over Dorchester. “I tell my friends from Boston they should look in Dorchester,” he says. “It’s so much better than Cambridge or Brighton or even Brookline because of the convenience to everything, the waterfront, the park – it’s easy. Sometimes I still get the gap, though, followed by ‘Dorchester? Why would I want to move there?’

“Five years ago, we had to convince people to move here,” Ozierow continues. “Even when the condos were about $190,000 to $230,000. But now, people in the know are coming in from everywhere: JP, Cambridge, the South End, South Boston. It’s only going to get better as more businesses move in.”

Tudor Sabie, who recently bought his own three-family on Neponset Avenue, has worked for At Home just a few months, but he feels like Dorchester is his home for good. “This is the best area of Boston,” he says. “All we need now is an indie bookstore, a movie theater and a yoga studio.”

Unlike Boston proper’s postage stamp-size one-bedroom condominiums, Dorchester’s condo market largely consists of two- and three-bedroom gut-renovations that still maintain turn-of-the-century detail like secreted closets, intricately carved wood moldings and built-in china closets. The Victorian houses, which fetch upwards of $1 million, boast floor plans of 5,000 to 6,000 square feet. Two- and three-bedrooms can list for under $300,000—a lower price than you’ll find even in Roxbury—but some condominiums soar up to $700,000, such as a condominium duplex on Sawyer Avenue in Jones Hill with wrought-iron detail, a mahogany bridge that leads into a private backyard, built-in bookshelves that frame a fireplace, and granite countertops.

“I have a real love for Dorchester,” says real estate developer Dan MincOCRO, who’s renovated several Victorian homes, including the Sawyer Avenue carriage house. “When I first started doing them, people thought I was crazy, saying things like, ‘Why there?’ Then they see the style, the high ceilings and hardwood floors. The attitude about Dorchester is definitely changing.”

Sprawling Dorchester encompasses many distinct neighborhoods, each with its own flavor. The following are some of Dorchester’s up-and-coming sections.

JONES HILL

When the Doctor Bill Brandon and his partner, Ted Ellison, relocated to Boston from New Orleans after Brandon took a job with a hospital in Quincy, their friends told them there was only one area in Boston for gay couples: the South End. But Brandon, 47, needed to drive to work, and the South End isn’t a welcoming place for drivers. Ellison, 34, a DJ who spins at Avalon, has equipment and records that call for a lot of space—not a common attribute of the $1 million-plus brownstones the couple’s friends were steering them toward. A realtor talked the men into looking at Jones Hill, describing it to them as the “new South End, so far,” and in November the pair bought a duplex on Sawyer Avenue in the Griffin House, named for the giant creatures carved into the wooden inlays that welcome visitors to the three-story Victorian.

“Our friends thought we were nuts when we moved to Dorchester,” Brandon says. “They asked us questions like, ‘Do you hear gunshots at night?’ But when they come out to visit, they love it. Now all of our friends are moving here.”

Jones Hill boasts commanding views of the city and Dorchester Bay. The closest subway stop is Savin Hill on

C.F. Donovan’s is one of several established eateries in Savin Hill.
the Red Line (the station is currently under renovation and slated to reopen in May). The inventory of high-end properties currently on the market includes a penthouse at 51 Sawyer Avenue with a loft bedroom, nice views and two full baths, for $459,000.

SAVIN HILL

Sporting one of the city’s most majestic views of the downtown skyline, Savin Hill was the first area of Dorchester settled when a group of Puritans from England built a fort on top of Rock Hill, in 1630. The area was later renamed for the red cedar (savin) trees that flanked the hill, Dorchester’s highest peak. In addition to the eponymous hill, which has been immortalized by countless artists who’ve captured sledgers racing down, Savin Hill also offers close access to Mattapan Beach.

Unlike some parts of Dorchester, the neighborhood is also home to some established eateries. Dorchester’s most famous bistro, Mark and Donnie Wahlberg, have been sighted at McKenna’s, a popular breakfast and lunch spot on Savin Hill Avenue. Across the street, trendy bistro C.F. Donovan’s has earned a following for its homemade meals. Savin Hill’s “OTB” neighborhood—short for “over the bridge”—is already pricey, but one two-bedroom condo available in a renovated schoolhouse on the attractive end of Savin Hill Avenue lists for $299,000.

MELVILLE PARK, FIELDS CORNER

When Anne Stein bought her condominium on the first floor of a Melville Avenue triple-decker last year, she knew she was moving into a nice area. But she was still surprised when the Melville Park Neighborhood Association rang her bell bearing a gift basket stocked with items from area businesses. “This is a great area, great investment,” Stein says. Some sections of FIELDS Corner remain spotty, however. Residents complain of a dilapidated strip mall that houses a liquor store, a check-cashing business and a shuttered Bradlee’s. “FIELDS Corner remains the forgotten Dorchester,” says Ed Regal, who manages the Emerald Isle Bar, a quaint Irish pub considered a mainstay among Dot natives. The area’s diverse population is apparent from the shops that flank the Emerald Isle. Up the street, takeout restaurant Chan O’Malley’s characterizes the Irish and Vietnamese who live alongside each other here. Fields Corner is next to Wellesley Park, an upscale neighborhood where gas lamps illuminate streets lined with Queen Anne Victorian homes. Condos here are sought after before even hitting the market. But that doesn’t stop realtors from driving around, or knocking on doors, in search of sales.

LOWER MILLS

Some would argue that Lower Mills is really Milton, the swanky start of the South Shore. But rest assured, the area that’s home to Dorchester’s only loft building, the Baker Chocolate Factory (which also includes artists’ residences), is definitely Dot. It has the updated feel of a neighborhood that recognizes its trendiness, with attractions like Flat Black Coffee Co., and the Common Ground Café, a health food restaurant nicknamed the “Cult Café” by locals because it’s run by members of the Twelve Tribes cult, which has been accused of child abuse and anti-Semitism. The area is primarily made up of tidy Cape Cod homes, but the Baker Chocolate Factory lofts are the most sought-after. Currently, a two-bedroom loft in the Chocolate Factory lists for $399,000. In