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Amid an uneven recovery, some suburbs thrive

Weston, Avon, and Salisbury have seen big gains in median household income in recent years

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MARK LORENZ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Jeannette Lazarus paints in the studio in her Salisbury condo where her husband, Peter Edwards, also has a carpentry shop.

By Steven A. Rosenberg and Matt Rocheleau

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When it comes to recovering from the worst recession since the Great Depression, some Greater Boston communities have fared better than others.

Fifty-one of 158 cities and towns in the region have seen median household income increase between the periods of 2005-2009 and 2010-2014, according to a Globe analysis of data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey. However, about two-thirds of communities have seen median income decline, relative to inflation.

Residents of Avon, Salisbury, and Weston enjoyed some of the biggest gains in Greater Boston. Weston's median household income jumped 23 percent, from \$163,637 to \$201,200, and in the process it became the wealthiest town in the state.

North of Boston, Salisbury — buoyed by a condo boom that has attracted empty nesters — had a median household increase of 26 percent, from \$60,320 to \$75,995, between those same five-year time periods. South of the city, in Avon, income climbed 17.1 percent, from \$67,235 to \$78,750.

Income growth could also be seen along a swath of communities along Route 128, particularly in the suburbs west of Boston.

Mark Melnik, director of economic and public policy research at the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute, said it was difficult to draw a single conclusion from the data. He noted that while the Commonwealth is rebounding from the last recession, the recovery has been uneven across the state, both geographically and across industries.

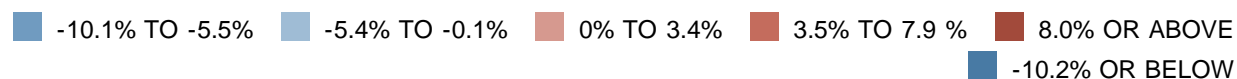
“I think in some communities where we see significant gains in household income, it is important to consider characteristics of those towns and their attractiveness to middle and upper-middle income residents, including quality of school, safety, and available housing stock,” said Melnik. “I think what we see in some places are upper income people clustering in communities with desirable



characteristics that are still reasonably close to Boston.”

Percent changes in median household income from 2005-2009 to 2010-2014

For this map, cities and towns were ranked by the percentage change in median income per household. Those that had a decrease were separated into three equal groups, and those that had an increase were separated into three equal groups, each labeled with a different color. The data is from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and is adjusted for inflation. Statewide median household income decreased by 4.67%, a drop of \$3,321.



With a minimum 1.5-acre residential zoning requirement for most of the town and a top-ranked school system, Weston has seen a surge of new residents who tear down up to 20 homes a year in order to build new houses on the properties, said Michael Harrity, chairman of the Board of Selectmen.

In addition to families moving in, he thinks residents also have boosted their incomes from investments and financial holdings.

“If people had their savings in properties or in the stock market, you would expect their income to have risen over that period of time,” said Harrity.

According to the state, the average single family home assessment in Weston rose from \$1.47 million in 2015 to \$1.54 million in 2016.

“We’re seeing a lot of people who are in finance and business moving in,” said Weston real estate agent Teri Adler.

With more than 2,000 acres of open space and riding trails, and quick access to Boston via the Massachusetts Turnpike and Route 128, the town is attractive to people like Kim and Matthew Fink. The couple moved to Weston nine years ago from Chestnut Hill because they wanted to build a new home and send their children to a good school system.



“The biggest draw for us was the Weston school system,” said Kim Fink, 47, whose husband is a manufacturing executive. “It’s an old school small town and a safe and lovely place.”

Recovery in the region has been mixed. North of Boston, 14 cities and towns experienced income growth between 2005-2009 and 2010-2014, while 43 had decreases. West of Boston, 23 communities saw increases and 30 experienced decreases. South of Boston, 14 communities saw income growth, while 34 experienced declines.

Statewide, the median household income dropped from \$71,167 to \$67,846, or 4.7 percent, during that same time, compared with a decline nationwide of 5.75 percent.

The American Community Survey’s definition of income includes most common types of income, such as wages, salaries, interest, and dividends. But there are certain exceptions, including capital gains, gifts, and lump sum inheritances.

The survey data is a compilation of five years worth of responses. The Globe analysis compared the results from 2005-2009 and 2010-2014. The so-called Great Recession began at the end of 2007.

Salisbury, which sits on the New Hampshire border, is known for its beach and marshes and in the last decade, for its condos. Over the last 10 years, 569 new residential units have been built. The town currently has 8,495 residents, adding 338 since 2010.

Jeannette Lazarus and her husband, Peter Edwards, were part of the first wave of empty nesters to buy a new condo in Salisbury. Lured by the ocean and the prospects of living in a new unit, they moved from East Boston to become the first residents of a 52-unit development on Sawyer Lane nine years ago.

Lazarus, who is an artist, set up a painting studio in the condo and Edwards built his own carpentry shop in the unit. “We looked for about two years and we loved the ocean and realized you could buy a whole lot more house here,” said Lazarus, 72.

Like many others, Lazarus and Edwards took advantage of good real estate prices, access to the beach and highway, and a low residential and commercial tax rate: \$11.67 per \$1,000 in valuation. Careful planning — including designating some of the condo complexes 55 and over — did not result in an increase in school enrollment, said Neil Harrington, Salisbury town manager.

“People are downsizing in some cases, and in other cases they’re just looking to escape a higher tax burden,” said Harrington, who added that the town has seen an economic surge over the last decade. Since then, a new CVS has been built, along with an \$8 million new library. Currently, an \$11.5 million police station is under construction.

In Avon, younger couples seeking to start a family have helped spur real estate sales, said Town Administrator Francis T. Crimmins Jr.

The town, which in recent years has welcomed the addition of big box stores such as Walmart, Home Depot, and Costco, has seen an increase in wealth.

Shanna Faro, 38, said she found her own American Dream in town. Faro, who works as an executive assistant and human resources coordinator at Town Hall, moved with her husband Justin, 40, an IT developer, to Avon nine years ago.

“We found an affordable house,” said Faro. Her home is just 21 miles from Boston, where her husband still works.

Faro said couples that recently moved to Avon have brought new ideas to the small town. “You do bring that ambition, and drive to improve things,” she said. Mornings, she drops her 6-year-old son, Cole, at the school bus stop, then drives to work.

On a recent Friday, when the power went out in town, she followed her instincts and walked over to her neighbors’ homes to see if they needed anything.

“We look out for each other and help each other,” she said.

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