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New Homes Near a Planned Train Stop

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Douglas Healey for The New York Times

Stone Ridge, with 70 condominiums, offers private club facilities and hotel-quality personal services.

And Kerry O'Sullivan is building four condominiums on Brentwood Avenue.

ABOUT 20 years ago, Kerry O'Sullivan bought a 12,500-square-foot lot here on Brentwood Avenue, one of the many narrow lanes lined with multifamily housing that branch off the Kings Highway East corridor. Mr. O'Sullivan, then a corporate manager dabbling in real estate investment, figured that he would someday develop the site, but with no immediate opportunities, he rented the two existing houses on the lot and waited.

Only now is he bringing in the bulldozers. For the past decade, the gleam of reinvestment has gradually brightened a section of town once dominated by auto shops and abandoned factories. But the emergence of a gigantic commercial development on a former foundry site off Black Rock Turnpike is speeding the transformation and spurring people like Mr. O'Sullivan to action.

That development, Fairfield Metro Center, will combine a new commuter rail station with nearly a million square feet of office, hotel and retail space on 35 acres off Exit 24 of Interstate 95. Though the groundbreaking will not take place until spring, developers are rushing in to upgrade the neighborhood's housing for a more professional clientele.

Property values reflect the area's new appeal. "Four years ago, my land was probably worth \$150,000, and that's with the houses on it," said Mr. O'Sullivan, who is now a builder. "Now, I'd say it's worth about \$800,000 to a developer."

Residential developments under way in Fairfield and over the border in the Black Rock neighborhood in Bridgeport range from entry-level units — like the four Brentwood Commons condominiums being built by Mr. O'Sullivan — to a full-service upscale condominium community known as Stone Ridge. Strictly urban in flavor, the developments are neighbors to luxury auto dealerships, office buildings, restaurants and two multiplex movie theaters.

The first phase of Metro Center is scheduled to open in 2008. It will include the rail station (Fairfield's third) with 1,500 spaces for commuter parking, the first of four planned office buildings, a 190-room Hilton hotel and a 30,000-square-foot fitness center.

Blackrock Realty L.L.C., operated by Kurt Wittek and Aaron Stauber, is developing the commercial parts of the project, while [Connecticut](#) has agreed to build the station platforms and pedestrian and vehicle overpasses linking Kings Highway East with the site. The town will pay for construction of the commuter parking area.

"The project has redefined the residential market for that area," said Mark S. Barnhart, Fairfield's director of community and economic development. The Stone Ridge condos are the clearest example, he added, because that construction "probably wouldn't have occurred if the rail station wasn't within a half mile."

Situated behind a Lexus dealership on Kings Highway East, Stone Ridge seemed an unlikely addition to the area when it was proposed two years ago by a [Manhattan](#) development team. "Local real estate pros were scratching their heads," Mr. Barnhart said.

A local developer had purchased the property for less than \$3 million and obtained the approvals for a 70-unit residential development. The Manhattan developers, Robert S. Skolnick and David H. Small, bought the land for \$9 million, then bolstered the development plan by adding private club facilities and hotel-quality personal services.

"There were people who thought we overpaid for the land," Mr. Skolnick said. "We thought we stole it."

So far, their hunches about the development's potential seem correct: in a year's time, more than half the units at Stone Ridge — one-, two- and three-bedrooms — have sold, at prices ranging from \$550,000 to \$950,000. Most buyers are professionals who want elegant surroundings, high security and the convenience of a concierge, but they are also "buying with the knowledge that appreciation is just to begin," said Isabelle Varda, the sales director. "Values in other areas in town have already topped out."

According to data compiled by Mark Markelz, vice president for sales of William Raveis Real Estate, in Southport, the average price of a single-family home in the neighborhoods around the Metro Center site — from Exits 23 to 25 on Interstate 95 — has risen 19.4 percent since 2004, to \$519,838. Townwide, the average is up about 3 percent, to \$765,519.

Condominium prices have risen 33.8 percent in the Metro Center area, to \$386,713, compared with a townwide increase of 40 percent, to \$513,219.

The Metro Center plan has also helped Black Rock, the neighborhood whose border is a stone's throw from the development site. A harbor community with sweeping views of Long Island Sound, Black Rock has

lately developed some cachet as an artsy area, with a multitude of restaurants. Though it is still less expensive than other coastal communities in Fairfield County, prices there are also rising.

"Metro Center has only added to the enthusiasm," said Ed Pinto, an agent with Century 21 Home Services Richter Real Estate and sales manager for the Village at Black Rock, a 105-unit condominium development on Fairfield Avenue. Though the development's sales model is not yet finished, 42 percent of the units are already sold, many to commuters who have been priced out of the Norwalk-Stamford market area, Mr. Pinto said. The two-bedroom units are priced at \$269,999 to \$339,900.

Yet another proposed condominium project, a high-rise development, has riled Black Rock neighborhood groups, which are worried about its impact on the community's village-like character. In the face of swelling opposition, the Greenwich-based Pearson Consulting Group and its development team recently withdrew plans for a 10-story condominium building on Black Rock's waterfront.

In community meetings, residents indicated they wanted a complex that did not cover the entire five-acre site, said Gregory J. Cava, a lawyer for the developers. That meant building a tower, but the proposed result — a 10-story building — struck some residents as "too vertical," Mr. Cava said. The developers are not deterred: they plan to submit a revised application within a few weeks.