

Wooing DC workers to live in Baltimore

By: Pete Pichaske March 15, 2019

Two years ago, Jennifer Tahan, an analyst for the federal government in Washington, D.C., lived in a tiny but pricey apartment in a city that was close to her job but never felt like home.

"D.C. just felt like a very transient city, people were always coming and going," said Tahan, now 26, who grew up in Silver Spring. "Nobody seemed proud to say D.C. was their home."



Brightly painted rowhomes in the Charles Village area. (Live Baltimore)

Today, she lives in her own rowhouse in central Baltimore's Barclay neighborhood. She pays \$800 less than she paid to rent her 450-square-foot apartment in D.C., has a short walk to Penn Station and a relaxing one-hour train ride to and from work.

Perhaps as important, she lives in a community that just feels right.

"I feel like when I come into the city it's my home," said Tahan, who moved to Baltimore in the fall of 2017. "I've met a lot of people here. I just really enjoy the life that I have in Baltimore. And, I would never have been able to afford something like this in D.C."

Tahan is something of a poster child for a trend that some Baltimore organizations have been pushing for decades: the move to Baltimore by men and women, especially young professionals, who work down Interstate 95 in the nation's capital.

The organizations have a multi-faceted sales pitch, but their chief argument is the affordability of housing. It can be a powerful argument, given the fact that the median home price in Baltimore (about \$150,000) is nearly one-quarter of the price in D.C. (about \$570,000).

"It's really an extreme difference," said Annie Milli, executive director of Live Baltimore, the nonprofit organization that more or less spearheads the city's effort to woo D.C. workers to Baltimore. "People can afford to buy their dream home here in Baltimore, while purchasing any home at all may be out of their reach in D.C."

Live Baltimore has been peddling its city as a home to Washington workers almost since the organization was founded in 1997, Milli said. Years ago, the campaign included events like happy hours in bars and ads in Washington newspapers. Today, as both advertising and the real estate market have evolved, the campaign is largely digital — targeting people whose on-line behavior suggests they are looking to buy a house, posting ads on various websites, inviting them to the many home-buying events Live Baltimore hosts every year.



Annie Milli

And while the city's affordability is the linchpin of the sales pitch, the boosters also like to tout Baltimore's arts scene, its restaurant scene and its cultural opportunities.

"And then we have the intangible things," Milli added. "Like strong communities with residents who really love one another and love their neighborhoods, people who participate in all kinds of fun traditions that make them feel at home here."

Given the commute between the two cities, inter-city train service plays a key role in attracting the D.C. workers and explains why the neighborhoods surrounding Penn Station are popular with many Baltimore-Washington commuters.

Amtrak and ridership has fluctuated for the past several years, but the rail service's numbers show total ridership increased from about 200,000 to about 210,000 in the last five years, according to Amtrak's figures. MARC has also seen an increase in ridership according to figures on the state's database website.

Trains run at least once an hour between the two cities from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m., more often during rush hours, and Amtrak plans to add faster and larger trains, with 30 percent more capacity, by 2021, according to spokeswoman Beth K. Toll.

Amtrak also is working with private developers on a long-awaited plan to modernize and expand the century-old Penn Station, Toll said.

Side-by-side with that effort, a mixed-use development that will include some 1.6 million square feet of residential, retail and office development is planned for the area surrounding the station.

The changes at and around Penn Station are crucial to attracting D.C. workers to Baltimore, according to Ellen Janes, executive director of the Central Baltimore Partnership. Her 13-year-old organization works to develop and improve the core of the city "in a way that will benefit existing stakeholders and attract new ones," according to its website.

"The commuting seems to be getting easier," Janes said of train service between the two cities. "Amtrak and MARC seem to be cognizant of what they need to do."

The Central Maryland Partnership's efforts include pushing for more housing in the area that will be enticing to both single people and families looking for an affordable, convenient place to live.

As an example, she mentioned plans for four multi-family project, each with 30-45 units, that "we expect to be attractive to D.C. commuters."

Like Milli at Live Baltimore and recent Baltimore convert Tahan, Janes said affordability and convenience are only part of the city's allure.

"We promote the cool things happening here, to try to get people in the habit of looking north," Janes said. "It's the funkiness of Baltimore, the row house living, the great park system, the fact that Baltimore is an arts hub in the national underground arts scene. ... It's all that."



Ellen Janes

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