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9 communities added to 'classic towns' list

By Joelle Farrell Inquirer Staff Writer

Regional planning officials are expanding a program that aims to attract new residents to older Philadelphia suburbs and lesser-known communities within the city and on its outskirts.

Yesterday, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) added nine communities to its list of "Classic Towns of Greater Philadelphia," a marketing effort aimed at online real estate shoppers.

New this year are Ardmore, New Hope, Phoenixville, Souderton/Telford and Wayne in the Pennsylvania suburbs; the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia; and Glassboro, Merchantville, and Moorestown in New Jersey.

"Glassboro is honored to join such a distinguished class of towns," Mayor Leo McCabe said.

The list now covers 20 communities that contribute \$2,500 annually to advertise under the banner "classic towns" mostly through a Web site set up by the DVRPC. The site touts the walkability and historic charms of the communities, and offers information on transportation to the city and local business options.

"The region has 352 local governments, so it's hard for any one small community to stand out," said Barry Seymour, executive director of the DVRPC. "We really want to try to promote people living in the region to look at these communities. . . . We want to promote good transit access . . . which reduces the burden and congestion on the roads."

The DVRPC recognized 11 "classic towns" last year: the boroughs of Ambler, Bristol, Collingswood, Doylestown, Haddon Heights, Lansdowne, Media, Riverton, and West Chester, and the Philadelphia neighborhoods of Manayunk and Overbrook Farms. All agreed to chip in the \$2,500 required to stay in the program and continue advertising in the Philadelphia and New York metro areas.

"It is the one piece of advertising we are doing," Ambler Mayor Charles T. "Bud" Wahl said. "In our opinion, it is our avenue to the outside world, and we're certainly not going to shut that off."

Having the commission's stamp of approval helps instill confidence in potential home buyers moving to the area, said Malcolm Johnstone, executive director of the West Chester Business Improvement District.

"People can feel comfortable when you see someone like DVRPC say, 'Yeah, this is a good place to live and to work and play, and ultimately make an investment,'" Johnstone said. "That could be enough to tip a sale."

The promotional program was a new venture for the DVRPC, an agency that typically sticks to offering planning advice. It saw the initiative as a way to promote what it considers smart growth in revitalizing communities hit hard by loss of industry, aging infrastructure, and declining population as more people left for larger houses in newer suburbs.

"We found real empirical evidence that people in these sort of older inner-ring communities have shorter commutes. They spend less per year on energy costs. They spend less per year on transportation costs," Seymour said.

The DVRPC is betting that increased energy costs will continue to bring people back to the "classic towns," which have mixed-use housing, transportation options, and a small-town feel that sets them apart from urban living.

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