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REAL ESTATE May 23, 2007, 5:06PM EST

Best Affordable Suburbs: South

Many Southern suburbs offer a rarely seen combination of strong job markets and low living costs. No wonder many are moving there

by Maya Roney

Relocating to a Southern state won't make you a true Southerner—but between the job prospects, the warm weather, and the sweet real estate deals, it might just make you a much happier person.

Got Georgia on your mind? Or maybe Arkansas? You wouldn't be the first. Between 2000 and 2006, the South added 8.5 million residents, boosting its total population by 8.5%, compared with 2% population growth in the Northeast and 3% in the Midwest. New births and immigration account for some of the recent population boom, but many people have also made the move South for extra space, better weather, cheaper prices, and new jobs at Houston oil companies or Raleigh (N.C.)-area tech firms.

In the final part of our four-part series on America's Best Affordable Suburbs in the U.S. by region—the first installment was on [suburbs in the Northeast](#), the second on [suburbs in the West](#), and the third on [suburbs in the Midwest](#)—the places on our list of the Best Affordable Suburbs in the South, compiled with Portland, (Ore.)-based research group Sperling's Best Places, have the best combination of affordability and quality that we have seen in any U.S. region.

THERE AND (HALF) BACK

The South is a vast and varied region, stretching from the oil reserves of Texas and Florida's resorts and beaches to the booming business centers of the Carolinas and Virginia. The region's housing markets differ, too. Parts of Florida are now struggling after years of unsustainable growth, though the state still has the third-largest market for luxury homes. New luxury markets are emerging in the Southeast states, while poverty remains widespread in other areas, such as Appalachia and the "Deep South" (see [BusinessWeek.com, 4/2/07, "The New Geography of Luxury Real Estate"](#)).

One of the main reasons for this growth is that over the past two decades, the U.S.'s economic centers have shifted away from Midwestern cities like Detroit and Cleveland to southern cities such as Atlanta, Charlotte (N.C.), and Dallas. Banks, automobile plants, and research parks have sprung up here, and as companies relocate to the area, they bring along their young adult employees.

Florida was always a popular place to retire, and it still is. Now the Carolinas, with their milder climate and scenic mountains and beaches, have also become hot destinations for retirees. Locals call them "half-backers"—Northerners who move to Florida and half the way back again. Another draw for the over-50 crowd? Many of their adult children have already moved to the state for job reasons. "I talked to some folks today who are moving here because that's where the grandkids are," says Mike Jaquish, a Realtor with Keller Williams Realty in Cary, N.C. and a town resident.

And for the average American family? Southern states have more than a few affordable, safe neighborhoods near big cities with good schools and friendly neighbors. The Best Affordable Suburbs on our list have an average cost-of-living index of 97

(just below the national average of 100), and half of the suburbs have median home prices below \$288,100. In all but two towns, school test scores are above the state averages, and the average violent crime index is just 58 (vs. the U.S. average of 100).

SUBURB IN BLOOM

In the South's largest metropolitan area, in the second-biggest state in the U.S., about a 15-minute drive from the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, lies the small city of Flower Mound, Tex., named for a large, wild flower-covered mound in the south of town.

Flower Mound shares a zip code with the nearby city of Lewisville, but the former is the more desirable area to live, according to Dottie Curry, a Realtor with Re/Max in the area. Lewisville is older and more industrial, while strict commercial zoning laws in Flower Mound keep the community quiet and mostly residential. "[The citizens of Flower Mound] have been very careful not to let the builders come in and ruin their town," says Curry.

Many residents of Flower Mound and Lewisville work at the airport, or in nearby downtown Dallas, which is about a 30-minute drive away. Texas Instruments (TXN) and ExxonMobil (XON) are headquartered here. Others commute to the northern suburb of Plano, the home base of companies such as JC Penney (JCP) and Countrywide Financial (CFC).

The bounty of major companies in Texas contribute to the state's gross domestic product of over \$1 trillion—the second highest in the U.S. last year after California. Even so, Texas housing is generally less expensive than in the rest of the country due to the state's less speculative market. Low taxation and limited regulation of business also keep the cost of living relatively low. Flower Mound is no exception—the median home price here is just \$249,900, and the cost-of-living index is 98.8.

"It's just a unique little town," says Curry. "And it's one I've never had trouble selling in."

CARY IN MY MIND

North Carolina, now the 10th most-populous state in the U.S., is one of the South's more recent success stories. The state's gross domestic product grew 3.9% in the 2005-06 fiscal year (July 1 to June 30), outpacing the nation's 3.5% rate. In 2006, it added 120,000 jobs—about 20,000 in construction, and 10,000 in financial services at companies such as Charlotte-based Wachovia (WB) and Bank of America (BAC).

The town of Cary, N.C., in the Raleigh-Durham area, exemplifies these recent changes in the state's population and economy. Due to its proximity to Research Triangle Park—a large and prominent high-tech research and development center that rivals Silicon Valley—Cary's population has exploded in recent years. Since 2000, the population has surged more than 24%, to 117,442, as many Northerners have relocated to the region for jobs with tech companies such as Lenovo and Red Hat (RHT), both based in Raleigh.

Despite the boom, Cary still doesn't feel like a big city. Maybe that's because it lacks big-city prices—half of all the homes in Cary are priced below the median home price of \$375,000. "The affordability is spread across town," says Cary real estate agent Jaquish. "There's a lot of more expensive new construction, but I can show you a nice, 1,300-square-foot ranch for about \$175,000."

Even Martha Stewart wants a piece of Cary. The domestic diva designed a line of KB Home-built (KBH) houses in the town's Twin Lakes community that range in price from the low \$200,000s to the mid-\$400,000s. Martha fans might also be pleased to know that Cary students score an average of 13% higher than the North Carolina average on high school standardized tests.

"I've been here for 10 years, but wish I'd been here for 20 years," says Jaquish, who moved to Cary from Pennsylvania. "It's not an up-and-coming place—it has arrived."

[Click here](#) to see the 25 Best Affordable Suburbs in the South.

Roney is Real Estate writer for BusinessWeek.com.

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Metro: Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson
Nearest city with pop. 50,000-plus:
Greenville (12.5 miles)

Median Home Price: \$184,900
Cost of Living Index: 99.8
Secondary School Test Score Index: 112
Violent Crime Index: 75
Percent pop. with commute < 30 min.: 77%

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