Brentwood, Tennessee

Hits a Prosperous Note

Just south of Music City, USA, is a land of large lawns, gated communities, and one of the wealthiest populations in the Southeast.

Paychecks from the Nashville area’s thriving healthcare sector, the country music industry, and corporate giants like Nissan North American and Verizon Wireless have made Brentwood, Tenn., and surrounding Williamson County among the most well-heeled suburban locales in the region. (Nashville is the county seat of neighboring Davidson County.)

“A lot of CEOs and business owners live there and drive into Nashville to their businesses,” said David Penn, an economist and director of the Business and Economic Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University in nearby Murfreesboro. “There’re a lot of white-collar jobs, and before the recession one of the big problems there was trying to find affordable housing for folks who work in the government sector.”

More than simply music
Half of Williamson County’s 10 largest employers and nine of the top 20 are hospitals or healthcare firms, such as hospital operator Community Health Systems Inc., according to the Brentwood Cool Springs Chamber of Commerce. Other major employers include the 185-bed Williamson Medical Center, Nissan North America, Verizon Wireless, and HCA, another hospital operator and healthcare service company.

In many ways, Brentwood is a typical suburb, affluent and mostly residential. The town’s median household income—$129,771—is more than double the national median figure and roughly triple the statewide median, according to 2008 figures from the U.S. Census Bureau. Further, the median value of owner-occupied homes in Brentwood is $474,600, about four times as much as homes in the rest of Tennessee and more than double the national median, the Census Bureau reports. “It’s a prestigious address to have,” said Lee Jones, the Atlanta Fed’s regional executive in Nashville.

Hitmakers give their town deep pockets
There is a musical note to the area’s wealth. Brentwood is home to a number of country music stars, including Tim McGraw, Faith Hill, Garth Brooks, Kix Brooks, Ronnie Dunn, Winona Judd, and Joe Don Rooney of the band Rascal Flatts, according to media reports.

Several players from the NFL’s Tennessee Titans also live in the area.
Given the demographics, it’s not surprising that Brentwood residents do their share of shopping. They spend about twice as much as the average Tennessean. According to the most recent available census data, annual retail sales per capita in the city totaled $20,973, double the figure for the state and nearly double the U.S. level.
In fact, Williamson County’s largest employer is the Cool Springs Galleria regional mall, where 3,500 people work. In terms of sales per square foot, the mall is among the 10 busiest of the 84 owned by CBL & Associates Properties Inc., according to the 2009 annual report the company filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Even amid recession and declining revenues, the city of Brentwood has maintained a balanced budget without layoffs or tax increases, according to the city’s budget report. A small sign of the city’s fiscal muscle: the police department has 73 vehicles and 72 employees. By comparison, Johns Creek, Ga., a similarly affluent suburban city north of Atlanta, with nearly double Brentwood’s population, has 44 patrol cars and 70 employees.

Growth has helped Brentwood fortify its finances. The city’s population has more than doubled since 1990, to roughly 36,000. However, a bigger population also increases demand for city services such as public safety and water, and the daytime influx of office workers adds to the population. The city’s budget report notes that “Brentwood actually functions as a city with a population in excess of 56,000 when the 20,000-plus office park employees are considered.” Maryland Farms is the local office park.

Relatively strict zoning regulations have restricted office and commercial development to limited areas, and as a young city—in corporated in 1969—Brentwood has no traditional downtown.

Recession made its mark
Despite its affluence, the recession did not leave Brentwood unscathed. Jones pointed out that home values there tumbled more than in some other places:

**Brentwood, Tenn.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>33,921</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Williamson County population</td>
<td>165,336</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$129,771</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median owner-occupied home value</td>
<td>$474,600</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey

This article was written by Charles Davidson, a staff writer for EconSouth.