

Listings of summer home rentals increase; visitors look for bargains



SARATOGA COUNTY — The number of homes available for rent this summer in Saratoga County is up from last year even as the demand for summer rentals is flat, according to rental agents, and some vacationers are looking for discounts.

Real estate broker Lori Leman said her business, Saratoga Realty Associates, is almost solely devoted to the summer rental season, which runs from the start of the New York City Ballet's visit to the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and heats up during the Saratoga Race Course's 36-day meet. She said the number of houses she has up for rent increased from 150 last year to 200 for this summer.

A sign advertises a house for rent Friday on Nelson Avenue in Saratoga Springs.

"Overall my numbers are exactly even from last year, which was my best year ever, but it's a different type of market," Leman said. "There have been far fewer full-season rentals for the entire six weeks. This year more people have been looking to negotiate prices."

Tom Federlin, owner of Racing City Realty, said last year he helped sell more than 200 summer leases for 150 houses in Saratoga County. This year demand is off slightly and he expects to write about 10 percent fewer leases, often with reduced prices.

"The biggest difference is everybody wants a discount and some are really tough in terms of how hard they're trying to negotiate," Federlin said. "I had somebody whose price for his house was \$5,500 [for a week] and the renter said, 'I won't pay that. Take it down to \$4,500 and throw in three extra days for free.'"

Kirk Tooley, an associate broker with William J. Cole Real Estate in Edinburg, said his company has always posted home rental listings on the company's Web site for free as a service to homeowners on the Great Sacandaga Lake. He said rental listings for homes on the lake are also up this year.

"I think there has been an increase of people putting their listings on our Web site. I've been handling more calls of people who want to put their properties up for rent."

Leman said a tremendous increase in rental supply may be contributing to depressed prices.

"More homeowners are looking to make some money off the rentals, so with the increased inventory not everybody is getting what they want in terms of the length of the rental or even the dollar amount."

Others point to the economy.

"I'm not an economist, so I don't know if Saratoga County or Saratoga Springs is hurting because of the economy, but I can tell you everybody who's coming here is saying, 'We're suffering, so you're going to suffer, too,'" Federlin said.

Hot weeks

For the rental real estate market, time frame can be as important as location. During the annual yearling horse sales in Saratoga Springs, brokers say demand is still red hot. Leman said customers come for the horse sales Aug. 2-19. "I'm almost completely sold out for those weeks."

Virginia "Ginny" Mick said her house at 122 Lincoln Ave. is within walking distance of the race track and she rents it out for most of August. Mick stays at another property she owns in Saratoga Springs while she's renting out her home.

She uses a "Welcome to my home" sheet of rules and instructions provided by Leman for her August tenants.

She said she's been able to easily rent her house for the same price she got last year and she credits a three-year contract to list her home with Leman.

Commercial competition

Another pinch on the housing rental market is an increase in hotel rooms in Saratoga Springs, up approximately 500 rooms, to about 1,500, from 2002, according to the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce.

"If you're going to come for a weekend I can't say it won't be cheaper to get a hotel room than rent a house, but if you're going to stay for a week it will be cheaper to rent a house," Federlin said.

Federal income tax rules allow for tax-free income from rent for 15 days when you rent out your home. Federlin said many homeowners he's helped use the tax-free money to set up college funds or to help pay mortgages.

He said the 15-day window also encourages some people to go on vacation for the days they'd like to rent out their homes, sometimes setting up inflexible schedules.

"That's a challenge because then I have to find somebody who's interested in that house for those particular weeks when the owners aren't there," he said.

Saratoga Springs resident Jake Mills said he set up a lease agreement to rent his home and being flexible helped him close the deal.

"I was somewhat flexible on the amount of time that I gave them. I gave back about a day."

For renters, a homeowner with a tight time frame can lead to bargains, Federlin said. He said some renters secure the homes they want as early as January, but others take their chances hoping for a deal.

"I guess it depends on whether or not you're a gambler, which I say very tongue-in-cheek because obviously most of them are."