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### **So long, California**

\* Family ties, better schools and simpler, less costly lifestyles are luring families east.

By Marnell Jameson, Special to The Times

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While on vacation with their three young sons last January, Mark and Ellen Kiely made their decision. Like many people, they had talked about moving out of Southern California for some time. They wanted to be closer to their family on the East Coast and to nature, get more home for their money and be near better public schools.

"On that trip, we were all together enjoying life and the outdoors, and it clicked," Mark Kiely said. "Ellen and I looked at each other and said, 'What are we waiting for?' "

Nine months later, the KIELYS had sold their Studio City home and were living on a saltwater inlet in Rhode Island, fishing and kayaking from their frontyard.

"Though the effort was Herculean," said Kiely, an actor who grew up in Rhode Island, "the payoff is seeing my kids so happy in this environment. I'm now able to give them the boyhood I know how to give. I couldn't do that in Los Angeles."

Although not everyone would trade the West Coast for the Northeast, the KIELYS are part of a quiet trend fueled by home equity and technology, such as the ability to telecommute, that is making it possible for more families to move out of state.

In a statewide survey of 2,500 California residents issued last month, one in four respondents said they were seriously considering leaving the state or moving to another part of the state to find cheaper housing. Of adults under 35, one-third were considering moving somewhere more affordable, according to the Special Survey on Californians and Their Housing, conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California.

"Up until two years ago, California had always been a net inbound state," said Doug Hill, president of the California Moving & Storage Assn., meaning that more households moved into the state than moved out to other states. That shifted in 2002, when California became a net outbound state. This year about 55% of all domestic moves that crossed the state line were households moving out; 45% were moving in. States with large populations, such as Florida and Texas, are drawing the most Californians.

"People in hot markets like Southern California look at their equity and think: 'Gee, if I sold, I could get a lot more house in another area, or a better quality of life, or I could retire,' " said Bert Sperling, author of "Cities Ranked & Rated: Your Guide to the Best Places to Live in the U.S. and Canada" (Wiley Publishing, 2004). And this line of reasoning makes sense for some residents of the Southland, where the median home value was \$410,000 in October, according to DataQuick Information Systems, more than twice the national median price.

But experts caution that there are many variables to consider before making a decision to relocate. Most people will focus on the cost of housing -- factoring in a real estate agent and moving costs -- and the emotional costs of upheaval. However, they may overlook other factors that define quality of life: schools, the new community's fiscal fitness, neighborhoods and proximity to family.

Others don't research all the tax implications, which can be sizable. Property taxes and sales taxes differ by community, and state income taxes vary, said Sperling, whose website, [www.bestplaces.net](http://www.bestplaces.net), gives an overview of the tax bite for residents in almost every city in the United States and Canada. It's best to talk to a tax professional in the new community to learn how your particular situation will be affected.

Brad Oleshansky, who moved his family from Sherman Oaks to an upscale suburb outside Detroit in July, was pleased to find that the sales tax in his new town of Birmingham was only 6%, compared with the 8.25% he was used to paying. But he was shocked to learn his property tax bill had tripled.

The property tax rate in Sherman Oaks is 1.25%; in Birmingham, Mich., it's 2.2%. Brad, 34, and his wife, Alison, 30, paid \$7,100 in property taxes on their home in Southern California, which was purchased for \$575,000 and sold for \$1,050,000. They paid \$1 million for their new Michigan home and this year will pay \$22,000 in property taxes.

But the tax disadvantages are outweighed by other benefits the Oleshanskys value. After their twins were born in 2000, the couple agreed that if he ever got a job offer that would bring them closer to either of their families, they would move. He's from Detroit and she's from Boston.

Though he had a good job working as a lawyer for an entertainment company, their desire to move out of Los Angeles, where they had lived for 12 years, grew as their children got closer to school age.

"We wanted a neighborhood with better public schools," he said.

So when Brad got a plum job offer in Detroit, the decision to move was easy. He got a bigger house and better schools, was closer to family and dropped his commute from almost an hour one way to six minutes.

"We had raised our twins for 3 1/2 years with no family support," Oleshansky said. "This move would not only solve our school issue ... but would also put us close to my family."

Proximity to family was also a deciding factor for the Kiely family in their move to Rhode Island. Today, the Kiely boys, ages 4, 7 and 9, live near 16 first cousins and many aunts and uncles. The older boys walk down a dirt road to catch the school bus, and each attends a class with only 17 other children, two teachers, and music and art enrichment programs, which didn't exist in their old public school.

"We decided our children, the environment, good schools and family were our priority," Mark Kiely said. "Life changes like this shouldn't be just financial."

But that part is working out too. An established actor and professional photographer, Kiely said the move "added a level of difficulty to my career," but his agent and his manager supported his decision. "I always fly to locations for work anyway, so who cares if I'm not flying in from Los Angeles?"

In fact, he just accepted a role in an upcoming film, "American Black Beauty," which begins shooting this month in Ventura. "That offer was nice, because it affirmed my decision." Ellen Kiely works part time doing financial consulting and helps in her husband's photo studio.

The couple, both 40, sold their 1,500-square-foot Studio City home for \$697,000. They had bought the property for \$345,000 three years ago. All their profit was tax-free because gains of up to \$250,000 for a single person or \$500,000 for a married couple are not taxed -- if the sellers meet the two-out-of-the-last-five-years residency requirement.

Now the Kielys are doing what their real estate agent, Ray Ross, of ReMax on the Boulevard in Sherman Oaks, believes more people should do. They're renting in their new community until they know which neighborhood they really want to live in.

"Typically, people new to an area hire an agent, tell him or her to show them everything within a price range, then pick the house they like best without taking into consideration all the subtleties of different neighborhoods," Ross said. "Later, they wished they'd taken more time to look and learn."

The Kielys like the neighborhood they're living in now and are looking at two others. Once they narrow their search, they plan to buy a home in the \$400,000-to-\$500,000 range by June. Meanwhile, their temporary home is 2,000 square feet and has a 33,000-square-foot lot for a yard. The house would normally rent for \$1,900 a month during the school year, but the Kielys are renting from a friend and paying only \$750.

The couple chose Rhode Island because they loved the small state and its simple outdoor lifestyle. Plus they knew the area.

Familiarity with the area helped make their move a success. Experts agree that the most common mistake people relocating make is not spending enough time getting to know a community before they buy.

Though you can compare cities online and in books, nothing reveals a city more than several visits, said Joe Hollingsworth, author of "The Southern Advantage" (Economic Research Press) and chief executive for the Hollingsworth Cos., in Clinton, Tenn., which develops business sites in areas he hopes are attractive to live and work in.

"No one should relocate to a new community until they have visited at least three times," Hollingsworth said, adding that each visit should have an express purpose, and both partners should go on all trips.

"People want to save money on airline tickets, so they try to do

everything in one trip, or send only one spouse," he said. "That's a mistake. People shouldn't risk their happiness to save a few hundred dollars. Successful moves require a lot of time and due diligence."

The diligence can begin by picking up the new city's local paper. Hollingsworth suggests checking for community events and timing a first visit when the town is having one to get a feel for the people. On that trip, check out shopping centers, restaurants and schools. Then use the Internet to investigate taxes, cost of living, unemployment rates and school scores.

A second visit should include a neighborhood search, not a home search. If focusing on living near a new job, look at all possible neighborhoods. Drive around and talk to people besides a real estate agent about the areas, Hollingsworth said. "Visit the barbershop."

By the third trip, start looking seriously at housing, and also try to visit a civic meeting. Depending on your interests, stop in at a meeting of the local PTA, the city council, the boating club, a charity group or the Rotary Club to get a sense of whether the community suits you.

A desire for more land and a lifestyle change motivated Richard and Barbara Metzler to sell their Mission Viejo home of 23 years in July and move to Medina, Ohio. But it was telecommuting that made it possible.

The Metzlers bought their 3,400-square-foot Mission Viejo home on less than a quarter-acre in 1981 for \$324,000 and sold it for \$800,000. Their new home on 26 acres cost \$600,000 -- it has 3,200 square feet plus a basement.

The couple, who are both 60 and have no children, had been discussing moving back to Ohio for 10 years. Before settling in California, the Metzlers had lived in Texas and Colorado.

"That was during a stage of my life when my career was booming, and we kept moving to the bigger house in the nicer area," Richard Metzler said. "It was a status thing."

As a telecommuter, Richard Metzler will keep his position as chief technology officer for a semiconductor firm and continue designing semiconductors and working on two start-up companies from his home base. His wife left her administrative assistant job and, once they're settled, will look for new work in Ohio.

"Something was wrong with our former way of life," Metzler said. "Life shouldn't be about status but about doing what you enjoy. For me that meant more land, less traffic and seeing the seasons change. Now when I've had a tough day, I go out and chop wood."

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### **Gathering data**

For relocation resources and other information to help in making moving decisions, visit:

\* [www.bestplaces.net](http://www.bestplaces.net)

\* [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

\* [www.realtor.com](http://www.realtor.com)

\* [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov) (Check the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics site for cost-of-living and unemployment figures.)

\* [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov) (The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration gives regional climate data.)

-- Marnell Jameson

PHOTO: HOOKED: In the backyard of their rented Rhode Island home, actor Mark Kiely helps son Danny with his fishing line while younger son Asher casts a reel.

ID NUMBER:20041212i7yq02kf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Photos by Glenn Osmundson For The Times

PHOTO: DOWN TIME: Mark Kiely and son Danny walk to the pond in their backyard. Kiely says, though it was tough to move, "the payoff is seeing my kids so happy in this environment."

ID NUMBER:20041212i7yq32kf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Glenn Osmundson For The Times

PHOTO: QUALITY TIME: In their rented house in Rhode island, Ellen Kiely bakes brownies with her sons Danny, 9, left, and Ean, 4.

ID NUMBER:20041212i7ypxwkf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Glenn Osmundson For The Times

PHOTO: TIDY PROFIT: The 1,500-square-foot Studio City home that the Kielys bought three years ago for \$345,000 sold this year for \$697,000.

ID NUMBER:20041212i7crm6kf

Descriptors: CALIFORNIA  
REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY  
TRENDS  
RELOCATION OF PEOPLE