



Pam Bewak

September 2008

REAL ESTATE *Update*

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Rates Drift Lower

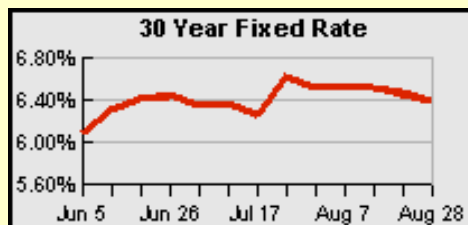
In Freddie Mac's results of its Primary Mortgage Market Survey the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage (FRM) averaged 6.40% for the week ending August 28, 2008, down from the previous week when it averaged 6.47%.

Last year at this time, the 30-year FRM averaged 6.67%.

The housing front is providing some encouraging signs. The pace of home price declines slowed down for the fourth straight month in June and the number of metro areas exhibiting monthly gains rose from seven to nine, according to

Mortgage Rates

Source: Realty Times



U.S. averages as of August 28, 2008:

30 yr. fixed: 6.40%
15 yr. fixed: 5.93%
1 yr. adj: 5.33%

the S&P/Case-Shiller 20-city composite index. There are also signs more buyers may be getting ready to return to the market.

How to Improve and Maintain Good Credit

Credit is a fickle



creature. The smallest change can make it go up and down without warning and can make you the happiest person in the world, or the most disappointed. Many people get in trouble with credit cards at a young age, mostly college age, and spend a large portion of their twenties trying to raise their credit scores. What should be emphasized to students, even before college, is to beware of credit card debt.

Consumers should only make purchases that can be paid off at the end of the month and pay their bill on time every month. That can increase your credit score dramatically and in a short period of time. Also, balances should never be more than 30 percent of the credit limit. So remember maxing out credit cards can hurt your score and keep you from buying a home in the future.

Another thing consumers can do to improve their score, or maintain a good score, is to pay bills on time. This includes utility bills, medical bills, and cell phone bills. Remember, it can take at least seven years to remove a collection from your credit report.

This is a negative mark against you when you try to apply for a home loan.

It is possible to correct and maintain a good credit score if you know the proper steps to take. Don't be too hard on yourself, we all make mistakes, but it's what you do now to correct them that counts. If you are unsure how to go about it, talk to a professional.

Existing-Home Sales Hit 5-Month High



Existing-home sales

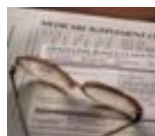
rose in July to the highest level in five months, although they continue to be well below the numbers from last year at this time.

Existing-home sales increased 3.1% in July to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 5 million units from a downwardly revised level of 4.85 million in June. NAR President Richard F. Gaylord, said the up-and-down pattern may break soon.

"We hope the new tools in the hands of home buyers from the recently enacted housing stimulus package will spark a sustained sales uptrend in the months ahead," he said. "Buyers who've been on the sidelines should take a closer look at what's available to them now in terms of financing and incentives.

Know Your Homeowner's Coverage

The typical



homeowner's policy includes coverage for perils and losses due to fire, lightning, tornadoes, windstorms, hail, explosions, smoke, vandalism and theft. Just as you would scrutinize the terms of your medical insurance, the nuances and details of your homeowner's policy should be examined seriously. Too often, homeowners sign up for a policy and go on autopilot regarding its terms and coverage without taking new acquisitions, risks, and increasing value of their homes into consideration. Most insurance agents recommend a regular insurance "check-up" for consumers, so that homeowners are not left "high and dry" when disasters and losses strike.



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What the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 Means for You

By Carla L. Davis



Good news has made its way into the real estate arena this summer -- in the form of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008. What does this Act mean for you?

It means a lot if you are in the market to be a first time homebuyer -- up to a \$7,500 tax credit if you purchase before July 1, 2009. And there's more good news. First time homebuyers is defined as, "a buyer who has not owned a principal residence during the three-year period prior to the purchase."

This means for all those markets that have started to stabilize, now could be a great time to buy. Let's take a closer look at just what this new incentive entails.

In order to receive the tax credit you must have purchased your home -- single-family detached, townhouses and condominiums, manufactured homes, and houseboats -- between April 9, 2008 and July 1, 2009. Purchase being the closing date.

You must also meet income requirements. But even if you are over the modified adjusted gross income level of \$95,000 (single) or \$170,000 (married), you may be able to receive partial tax credits.

And getting started with the tax credit program is simple. You claim the tax credit on your federal income tax return. That's it. It doesn't require any other confusing, fancy paperwork.

You can even access the funds quick -- instead of waiting to

file your return. The NAHB reports, "Buyers who believe they qualify for the tax credit are permitted to reduce their income tax withholding. Reducing tax withholding (up to the amount of the credit) will enable the future home buyer to accumulate cash by raising his/her take home pay. This money can then be applied to the downpayment. Buyers should adjust their withholding amount on their W-4 via their employer or through their quarterly estimated tax payment. IRS Publication 919 contains rules and guidelines for income tax withholding."

What's tricky about this Act -- its a tax *credit*, meaning that you must repay the government either over the next 15 years (no interest charged), or when you sell the home, if there were sufficient capital gains from the sale.

The NAHB gives this example, "A home buyer claiming a \$7,500 credit would repay the credit at \$500 per year. The home owner does not have to begin making repayments on the credit until two years after the credit is claimed. So if the tax credit is claimed on the 2008 tax return, a \$500 payment is not due until the 2010 tax return is filed. If the home owner sold the home, then the remaining credit amount would be due from the profit on the home sale. If there was insufficient profit, then the remaining credit payback would be forgiven."

So why do you have to repay this credit? Because this is just that -- a credit, not a deduction. The government's hope is that this credit will stimulate the housing market ... and in turn the economy. By providing first-time home buyers with a little financial boost -- remember it's interest free -- it could do just that.



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How To Find A Solar System Contractor

By Broderick Perkins



With city, state and federal initiatives shouting 'solar!' from the rooftops, finding competent solar equipment installers is paramount. Solar and other renewable energy rebates and initiatives from the federal government down to city jurisdictions are prompting more contractors to hang a "solar installer" shingle, take to rooftops and cash in on the demand.

It's relatively simple to install and maintain a \$30,000 flush-mounted, rooftop, 320-square-foot, PV array efficiently generating 3 kilowatts -- enough power to meet the needs of a 2,500 square foot home. Simple that is, provided the PV panel installer is experienced in the task at hand.

As with hiring any professional, a good start to finding a solar contractor is to seek referrals from family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and others you trust who also recently purchased a system with which they are satisfied.

The referrals should be to licensed contractors or, better yet, licensed solar contractors who work in your area. Contractors typically obtain a license by proving their skills through education or training, testing, in-the-field experience or some combination of all those efforts.

More specifically, solar contractors are licensed after meeting requirements specific to the specialty. In some states, designated solar contractors are licensed to perform solar energy work and only other building or construction work necessary to install an active solar system.

The licensing process typically also comes with continuing education services to keep contractors current on techniques, codes and the like. It also includes a regulatory system that helps weed out the bad apples. Consumers get an official agency where they can check the record of contractors, lodge complaints and seek redress for problems.

Truly professional contractors also won't work without a permit, which means the local building inspector will examine the work for compliance with current building codes. Avoid any contractor who attempts to circumvent the permit process.

Most states don't have regulations for a designated "solar contractor," but each state's renewable energy incentive program can help. The Database of State Incentives for Renewable Energy offers a clickable-map data base of federal,

state and local renewable energy programs, each of which can help you find qualified contractors and educational and financing information for consumers. Even where there's no "solar contractor" license category, incentive programs typically come with state-registered or program-registered contractors and or approved solar and other renewable energy systems.

You can also tap solar energy trade groups to find contractors, especially in areas where they aren't regulated. Trade groups typically come with a code of ethics, training requirements and a network of product research, development and educational services for its members.

Home owners considering hiring a professional solar system installer should also get schooled in solar technology to be better equipped to interview prospective contractors. Select a contractor who has years of experience installing grid-connected systems and who isn't afraid to refer you to satisfied customers.

The contractor should also have site savvy -- clear, unobstructed access to the sun is crucial. The contractor should also be able to help you decide what size system you need to generate all the power necessary for your home or just a portion. It's up to you not to let the contractor sell you more power than you need. The incentive programs and utilities can help you calculate how much of a rooftop array you really need based on past energy use.

The contractor should also be familiar with special features your system may need including an inverter necessary to change the direct current (DC) power from the solar panels into alternating current (AC) electricity to power your electrical devices and to be compatible with the electric grid. Batteries, which increase your cost, provide back-up and storage power for your home during grid outages and gray days.

Each incentive program explains the local utility connection requirements including which utilities will buy excess power and which will let you pump juice back into the grid without reimbursing you, but the contractor also should be familiar with grid connections, metering and what happens to excess power.

Finally, get several bids and make sure the bids are for the identical solar system.



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Moving Away From Heavy Gasoline Use

By Broderick Perkins



You may have to move to get away from the high cost of gasoline. Well, you really can't get away from the high cost but a move could help you use less gas. That is, if you move to a transit oriented development (TOD).

If your next home is in a TOD community, your housing choice could help defray the cost of gasoline by lowering demand and dependency on its use while easing the environmental impact of burning fossil fuels and sprawl.

With a gallon of gasoline around the \$3.75 mark -- up more than a buck from a year ago nationwide -- a group of organizations say housing affordability isn't only a measure of what portion of your income you shell out for the mortgage and related costs, but also the cost of transportation to and from work, school, worship, shopping, medical care and the host of other destinations you regularly visit.

Simply put, the nearer you live to those destinations or the more transportation options available to you from your community, the more opportunities you'll have to spend less on petrol fueled transportation.

When the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) and Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP) last calculated the effects of gasoline costs on the household budget, gasoline was only \$1.85 a gallon nationwide, and some communities were spending as much as 20 cents on every dollar for gasoline.

Imagine what a more than doubling of gas prices has done to a household budget that hasn't had the benefit of higher incomes.

That makes TODs more viable than ever, primarily for the gasoline savings, but also for a host of other reasons.

- A well-conceived and developed TOD is designed to focus compact growth around transit stops to bring riders closer to transit facilities, to encourage walkable infill development, and save land. They can be built to contain many elements of the

so-called "new urbanism" or "neo-traditionalist" developments named for a more traditional pedestrian-friendly, easy-access-to-essentials approach to development that has less impact on the infrastructure than sprawl.

- TODs are viable in both urban and suburban settings, provided development is not simply adjacent to transit, but shaped by transit in terms of parking, density, and building orientation.
 - TODs provide mobility options, very much needed in the most congested metropolitan areas. This allows young people, the elderly, low-income people, people who prefer not to drive or own cars the ability to get around.
 - TODs can lower annual household drive times by 20 percent to 40 percent for those living, working and/or shopping near transit stations. Reduced driving time means reduced driving expense to the tune of thousands of dollars a year.
 - Reduced drive time also means reduced air pollution and energy consumption. TODs can reduce rates of greenhouse gas emissions by 2.5 to 3.7 tons per year for each household. Likewise, TODs typically consume less land than low-density, auto-oriented growth and it reduces the need to convert farmland and open spaces to development.
 - Also, by creating active communities that are busy through the day and evening, TODs put more "eyes on the street" and that increases safety for pedestrians, transit-users, and others.
- Championing the TOD cause, The Center for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is an initiative that includes input from a host of like-minded organizations including: Congress for the New Urbanism, Reconnecting America, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Surface Transportation Policy Project, and the Urban Land Institute.



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New Fed Rules To Prevent Future Runs on Bad Loans

By Broderick Perkins



Paramount in new federal regulations approved to foster more responsible mortgage lending, are the implications for consumers shopping for a home loan. The Federal Reserve Board's new rule amends the "Truth In Lending Act," Regulation Z under the "Home Ownership and Equity Protection Act (HOEPA)".

HOEPA was originally passed in 1994 to target abusive practices in home equity lending. The Fed's new move extends protections to home purchase loans.

Critics complain the rule is long over due because unfair, abusive and deceptive home mortgage lending practices get much of the blame for the current housing crisis that has already put millions of properties in foreclosure and former owners on the street.

Also, most lenders long ago curtailed many of the practices now forbidden by the new regulations, critics say. The horse is already out of the barn, so to speak, and the new regulations will do little to corral the market's downward stampede.

However, the new rules should help prevent future runs on bad loans by helping remove them from the market. Perhaps more important, key provisions in the new rules will give consumers cause to pause before shopping for a mortgage. Effective October 1, 2009, the new rule's four key provisions (along with how each will impact consumers), for a newly defined, but yet to be detailed category of "higher-priced mortgage loans," include protections that will:

- Prohibit a lender from making a loan without regard to borrowers' ability to repay the loan from income and assets other than the home's value.
- This forces lenders to more closely scrutinize a borrower's debt-to-income ratio, looking for less debt, more income and savings, larger down payments and other liquid assets the borrower can fall back on. Consumers may have to take more time saving and paying off debt before buying a home.
- Require creditors to verify the income and assets they rely upon to determine repayment ability.

This provision will make it especially tough for home-based business owners, self-employed people, contract workers and others who don't get a regular pay stub. Lenders were already

asking many of these borrowers for a CPA's or other tax professional's certified profit-and-loss statement to reveal income viability.

- Ban any prepayment penalty if the payment can change in the initial four years. For other higher-priced loans, a prepayment penalty period cannot last for more than two years.

Without this lender risk-reducing tool they are more likely to offer a narrower variety of loans, forcing some consumers out of the market and more of them to spend more time shopping around. Shopping around, of course, is a smart practice.

- Require creditors to establish escrow accounts for property taxes and homeowner's insurance for all first-lien mortgage loans.

This means borrowers will have to figure on paying more each month than just the home loan's principle and interest (or interest only, where available). This is actually a useful tool for borrowers, especially those who procrastinate and gamble they'll have the lump sum cash when the insurance premium or property tax comes due. Financial counselors have always advised spreading out the cost of insurance and taxes over 12 monthly payments is much easier to fit into a household budget than the lump sum risk. In addition to rules for higher priced home loans other rules include:

- Creditors and mortgage brokers are prohibited from coercing a real estate appraiser to misstate a home's value.
- Companies that service mortgage loans are prohibited from engaging in certain practices, such as pyramiding late fees. Servicers are also required to credit consumers' loan payments as of the date of receipt.
- Creditors must provide a good faith estimate of the loan costs, including a schedule of payments, within three days after a consumer applies for any mortgage loan secured by a consumer's principal dwelling, such as a home improvement loan or a loan to refinance an existing loan. Currently, early cost estimates are only required for home-purchase loans.
- The rules also specifically outlaws seven deceptive and misleading advertising and requires more extensive information about rates, monthly payments and other loan features.



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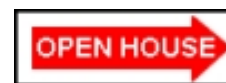


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REAL ESTATE *Update*

Open The Doors And Buyers Shall Come - But Prepare First!



By Phoebe Chongchua

If your home is on the market, chances are your agent will be holding an open house. Open Houses can be a great way to drive buyer traffic to your home. But most often the desire to physically come and see your home starts with a picture on the Internet.

"I have developed a proprietary way to build layers into a room to give that depth when you're putting the photo on the website," says Christine Rae owner of Certified Staging Professionals (CSP) and co-author of *Home Staging For Dummies*.

She says, "Curb appeal starts on the Internet so it's very important to make the pictures of your home attractive. If the Internet picture doesn't sell your home, you might not ever get the buyers to actually do a physical drive by and come inside your home.

Once you entice buyers with an eye-catching picture, then you have to keep up the good work. "Everywhere the eye rests, the sale begins. So that means everything counts: floors, walls, ceilings, windows, the stuff outside, inside, cleanliness, attention to detail," says Rae.

"The buyer is expecting something fantastic and if you've got anything less than a fantastic-looking property, you're less likely to get the offer that you're looking for," explains Rae.

Rae shares a few tricks of the trade to help you before you hold an open house.

Target your buyers.

Rae says target the buyers you think are most likely to buy your home. That means paying attention to economic trends in your market. Also, when advertising, feature the items that are likely to attract the targeted buyers.

For example, "there's a big demographic growing for single women buying homes. They bought 20 percent of the homes last year and that's a growing trend. You've got to target what's appealing to them such as building in a security system - - a very crucial element to selling that home to them," says Rae.

Energy efficiency can help sell your home.

"Anytime you can bring light into a house, that is going to make people feel good," says Rae.

That's why agents typically open curtains and blinds and turn on all the lights before a showing. It's a simple thing to change all the light bulbs to energy-efficient light bulbs. "By 2010, North American energy costs are going to rise 50 percent. Who would not want a more energy-efficient home? If you're focusing on energy-efficiency, that's going to help the buyer buy your house," says Rae.

Rae says the energy-efficient light bulbs in a daylight finish are great for helping show off your home. "Daylight bulbs, when they are placed in retail stores, increase retail sales by 40 percent. That reduces energy costs and increases sales; so doesn't that make sense that it's going to have a dynamic effect when you put it into a domestic home?" says Rae.

Good sound system? Then play music.

"You have to target the buyer. It can't be elevator music and it can't be funeral music or rock generally an easy-listening good sound track lifts spirits. People are always apprehensive when they are looking at houses. They feel like they are prying into somebody else's house. So, make your house not feel like that," says Rae.

Remember, that buyers need to feel comfortable when viewing your home. Don't cook anything the night before that might permeate through the entire house and leave a pungent odor. Put away personal items. Get the dog out of the house and roll out the welcome mat!

"A buyer doesn't want to feel like a guest in your home so you have to remove anything that would cause any trepidation," says Rae.

Invite your neighbors over for a preview. You never know who your neighbors know. They might have the perfect buyer for your home. So, open the doors and invite buyers into your home, not as guests but as potential homeowners and watch the offers roll in.



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Investor Report: Hidden Tax Pitfall

By Kenneth R. Harney



Here's a tax alert for real estate investors who use popular tax-free exchanges: The recently signed federal housing legislation contains a hidden zinger that could cost you thousands of dollars if you don't plan around it.

As of next January 1st, investors who exchange into rental or second home properties that they later convert into their personal homes no longer will be eligible for the full \$250,000 to \$500,000 tax-free exclusions now available on sales of principal residences.

Instead, they'll need to allocate their time of ownership between taxable investment or second home usage and non-taxable principal residential usage.

To qualify for tax-free exclusions they'll still need to use a property as their primary home for two out of the five years preceding any sale or exchange. But if any part of their total usage time after January 1st is what the new law calls "nonqualified" -- that is, investment, rental or second home use -- then that will lower their maximum exclusion.

This is an especially big deal for investors using "Section 1031" exchanges because they frequently shield their real estate gains on rental houses and condos by moving into them for a couple of years and converting previously taxable gains into non-taxable principal residential profits.

Just how popular has that technique been in recent years? "Extremely popular," says tax-free exchange intermediary George Foss in Littleton, New Hampshire. "Many of my clients have used it because it's a way to totally shield yourself" from capital gains taxation.

Congress's new limitation of the strategy is "terrible in my opinion," said Foss. "It's just rotten."

An example of the dollars and cents impact of the change was provided by the Federation of Exchange Accommodators, a national trade group representing investors and intermediaries. Under the old law, an investor could exchange into a property that he or she then rents out for three years. Then the investor would move in and use the property as a principal residence for two years.

When the investor -- who is single -- sold the house for a \$300,000 gain, \$250,000 of that amount would be tax-free under the old law.

Under the new law, three fifths of that gain -- \$180,000 out of the \$300,000 -- would be taxable, while just \$120,000 would be tax free.

That \$130,000 difference is why exchange investors are so upset with Congress's latest tax increase.



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Don't Overlook The Garage When Getting Your Home Ready To Sell

By Phoebe Chongchua



There's a lot of talk about curb appeal being the driving force drawing buyers into your home. It makes sense. If the house looks a mess from the outside, what buyer would want to set foot inside? Well, maybe your house isn't quite a mess. You have taken the time to fix-up the landscape, power-washed the house, and even painted the mailbox. But did you overlook what can be the biggest eyesore -- the garage? "It's the largest architectural element on the house. So it really, in this day and age, is impossible to dismiss the garage door as an important architectural element," says Braden Wasserman, owner of Access Custom Garage Doors.

But the garage door is more than an architectural element. It can be a trigger point for buyers. They're driving down the street in a tract-home neighborhood and suddenly they spot a custom wooden garage door. It's striking and different and often gives them reason to stop and take a closer look, maybe even come inside.

"If you have a house that has a nice garage door, it sets the stage for the fact that everything else in the house is going to have attention to detail and it really does differentiate homes that are on the same street," says Wasserman. He says with some exterior paint and a unique garage door, "The house really becomes a semi-custom house."

According to Wasserman, swapping out an old steel-style, raised-panel garage door that once was so very traditional is a huge improvement to a home.

"It was interesting that you would go past these \$5 or \$6 million houses where the architects and designers paid such critical attention to detail to the stucco color, the stonework, and the rooftop. Then for the biggest element, they would just put this wide raised-panel steel door because the consumer wasn't educated on how important the garage door can be in really just buttoning up and completing the design of a house," says Wasserman. However, these days, custom wooden doors aren't just for multi-million dollar homes. People in tract homes are making the switch either for their own benefit, a faster sale, or a potential gain in the value of the property.

"There is definitely an increase in the property value commensurate with the investment that you make in the garage door. And then there is the perceived value. For every \$5,000 of door that you put in, you get four times that dollar in perceived

value," says Wasserman. What makes wooden garage doors so special is not only the escape from conformity but also the fact that they function like traditional automated steel doors.

"They work exactly like a standard upward-acting sectional garage door. They segment on a track and they use a conventional residential garage door opener. Only from the front elevation do we try to design the doors to look like they're the old fashion carriage garage doors that swing open," explains Wasserman.

The added decorative hardware, including handles and hinges, helps create the effect of an old-fashioned-garage door. But not every garage door works with every style of home. Wasserman says you should really take a close look at your architectural style before you decide on the right garage door. He says homeowners should match their home architecture to a garage door that is architecturally congruent.

"That way you're making the whole house just look that much more custom and fitted," says Wasserman.

Then next vital thing to look for in custom doors is to choose the appropriate material.

"It's very, very critical that the lumber you select is designed and can last and can be durable for an exterior application," says Wasserman. He says typically that lumber would be mahogany, cedar, or redwood. Teak also works well outside but is very expensive.

You should also note that with wooden garage doors there may be a little more maintenance depending on how much sun exposure the door gets. Wasserman recommends using a resin-based product to finish the garage door rather than a varnish. "A varnish is a really difficult product to maintain because when it fails, you have to strip the wood back down to the bare wood and you have to re-start the process from scratch and that becomes cost-prohibitive for these doors," explains Wasserman. Resin-based products are easier to clean. New product can also be applied directly over the old.

Whether or not you decide to replace your garage door, it's important to make sure it at least is working properly.

The key concept to remember is that a garage door shouldn't just house your car and all your stuff that won't fit in your home. Instead it should help to entice buyers to want to see more of the house.



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September Real Estate Update

Rates Drift Lower

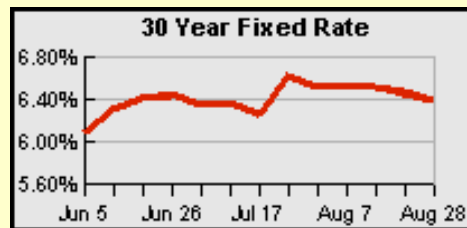
In Freddie Mac's results of its Primary Mortgage Market Survey the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage (FRM) averaged 6.40% for the week ending August 28, 2008, down from the previous week when it averaged 6.47%.

Last year at this time, the 30-year FRM averaged 6.67%.

The housing front is providing some encouraging signs. The pace of home price declines slowed down for the fourth straight month in June and the number of metro areas exhibiting monthly gains rose from seven to nine, according to

Mortgage Rates

Source: Realty Times

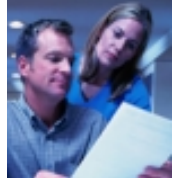


U.S. averages as of August 28, 2008:

30 yr. fixed: 6.40%
15 yr. fixed: 5.93%
1 yr. adj: 5.33%

How to Improve and Maintain Good Credit

Credit is a fickle



creature. The smallest change can make it go up and down without warning and can make you the happiest person in the world, or the most disappointed. Many people get in trouble with credit cards at a young age, mostly college age, and spend a large portion of their twenties trying to raise their credit scores. What should be emphasized to students, even before college, is to beware of credit card debt.

Consumers should only make purchases that can be paid off at the end of the month and pay their bill on time every month. That can increase your credit score dramatically and in a short period of time. Also, balances should never be more than 30 percent of the credit limit. So remember maxing out credit cards can hurt your score and keep you from buying a home in the future.

Another thing consumers can do to improve their score, or maintain a good score, is to pay bills on time. This includes utility bills, medical bills, and cell phone bills. Remember, it can take at least seven years to remove a collection from your credit report.

This is a negative mark against you when you try to apply for a home loan.

It is possible to correct and maintain a good credit score if you know the proper steps to take. Don't be too hard on yourself, we all make mistakes, but it's what you do now to correct them that counts. If you are unsure how to go about it, talk to a professional.

Existing-Home Sales Hit 5-Month High



Existing-home sales

rose in July to the highest level in five months, although they continue to be well below the numbers from last year at this time.

Existing-home sales increased 3.1% in July to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 5 million units from a downwardly revised level of 4.85 million in June. NAR President Richard F. Gaylord, said the up-and-down pattern may break soon.

"We hope the new tools in the hands of home buyers from the recently enacted housing stimulus package will spark a sustained sales uptrend in the months ahead," he said. "Buyers who've been on the sidelines should take a closer look at what's available to them now in terms of financing and incentives.

Know Your Homeowner's Coverage

The typical



homeowner's policy includes coverage for perils and losses due to fire, lightning, tornadoes, windstorms, hail, explosions, smoke, vandalism and theft. Just as you would scrutinize the terms of your medical insurance, the nuances and details of your homeowner's policy should be examined seriously. Too often, homeowners sign up for a policy and go on autopilot regarding its terms and coverage without taking new acquisitions, risks, and increasing value of their homes into consideration. Most insurance agents recommend a regular insurance "check-up" for consumers, so that homeowners are not left "high and dry" when disasters and losses strike.



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What the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 Means for You

By Carla L. Davis



Good news has made its way into the real estate arena this summer -- in the form of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008. What does this Act mean for you?

It means a lot if you are in the market to be a first time homebuyer -- up to a \$7,500 tax credit if you purchase before July 1, 2009. And there's more good news. First time homebuyers is defined as, "a buyer who has not owned a principal residence during the three-year period prior to the purchase."

This means for all those markets that have started to stabilize, now could be a great time to buy. Let's take a closer look at just what this new incentive entails.

In order to receive the tax credit you must have purchased your home -- single-family detached, townhouses and condominiums, manufactured homes, and houseboats -- between April 9, 2008 and July 1, 2009. Purchase being the closing date.

You must also meet income requirements. But even if you are over the modified adjusted gross income level of \$95,000 (single) or \$170,000 (married), you may be able to receive partial tax credits.

And getting started with the tax credit program is simple. You claim the tax credit on your federal income tax return. That's it. It doesn't require any other confusing, fancy paperwork.

You can even access the funds quick -- instead of waiting to

file your return. The NAHB reports, "Buyers who believe they qualify for the tax credit are permitted to reduce their income tax withholding. Reducing tax withholding (up to the amount of the credit) will enable the future home buyer to accumulate cash by raising his/her take home pay. This money can then be applied to the downpayment. Buyers should adjust their withholding amount on their W-4 via their employer or through their quarterly estimated tax payment. IRS Publication 919 contains rules and guidelines for income tax withholding."

What's tricky about this Act -- its a tax *credit*, meaning that you must repay the government either over the next 15 years (no interest charged), or when you sell the home, if there were sufficient capital gains from the sale.

The NAHB gives this example, "A home buyer claiming a \$7,500 credit would repay the credit at \$500 per year. The home owner does not have to begin making repayments on the credit until two years after the credit is claimed. So if the tax credit is claimed on the 2008 tax return, a \$500 payment is not due until the 2010 tax return is filed. If the home owner sold the home, then the remaining credit amount would be due from the profit on the home sale. If there was insufficient profit, then the remaining credit payback would be forgiven."

So why do you have to repay this credit? Because this is just that -- a credit, not a deduction. The government's hope is that this credit will stimulate the housing market ... and in turn the economy. By providing first-time home buyers with a little financial boost -- remember it's interest free -- it could do just that.



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How To Find A Solar System Contractor

By Broderick Perkins



With city, state and federal initiatives shouting 'solar!' from the rooftops, finding competent solar equipment installers is paramount. Solar and other renewable energy rebates and initiatives from the federal government down to city jurisdictions are prompting more contractors to hang a "solar installer" shingle, take to rooftops and cash in on the demand.

It's relatively simple to install and maintain a \$30,000 flush-mounted, rooftop, 320-square-foot, PV array efficiently generating 3 kilowatts -- enough power to meet the needs of a 2,500 square foot home. Simple that is, provided the PV panel installer is experienced in the task at hand.

As with hiring any professional, a good start to finding a solar contractor is to seek referrals from family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and others you trust who also recently purchased a system with which they are satisfied.

The referrals should be to licensed contractors or, better yet, licensed solar contractors who work in your area. Contractors typically obtain a license by proving their skills through education or training, testing, in-the-field experience or some combination of all those efforts.

More specifically, solar contractors are licensed after meeting requirements specific to the specialty. In some states, designated solar contractors are licensed to perform solar energy work and only other building or construction work necessary to install an active solar system.

The licensing process typically also comes with continuing education services to keep contractors current on techniques, codes and the like. It also includes a regulatory system that helps weed out the bad apples. Consumers get an official agency where they can check the record of contractors, lodge complaints and seek redress for problems.

Truly professional contractors also won't work without a permit, which means the local building inspector will examine the work for compliance with current building codes. Avoid any contractor who attempts to circumvent the permit process.

Most states don't have regulations for a designated "solar contractor," but each state's renewable energy incentive program can help. The Database of State Incentives for Renewable Energy offers a clickable-map data base of federal,

state and local renewable energy programs, each of which can help you find qualified contractors and educational and financing information for consumers. Even where there's no "solar contractor" license category, incentive programs typically come with state-registered or program-registered contractors and or approved solar and other renewable energy systems.

You can also tap solar energy trade groups to find contractors, especially in areas where they aren't regulated. Trade groups typically come with a code of ethics, training requirements and a network of product research, development and educational services for its members.

Home owners considering hiring a professional solar system installer should also get schooled in solar technology to be better equipped to interview prospective contractors. Select a contractor who has years of experience installing grid-connected systems and who isn't afraid to refer you to satisfied customers.

The contractor should also have site savvy -- clear, unobstructed access to the sun is crucial. The contractor should also be able to help you decide what size system you need to generate all the power necessary for your home or just a portion. It's up to you not to let the contractor sell you more power than you need. The incentive programs and utilities can help you calculate how much of a rooftop array you really need based on past energy use.

The contractor should also be familiar with special features your system may need including an inverter necessary to change the direct current (DC) power from the solar panels into alternating current (AC) electricity to power your electrical devices and to be compatible with the electric grid. Batteries, which increase your cost, provide back-up and storage power for your home during grid outages and gray days.

Each incentive program explains the local utility connection requirements including which utilities will buy excess power and which will let you pump juice back into the grid without reimbursing you, but the contractor also should be familiar with grid connections, metering and what happens to excess power.

Finally, get several bids and make sure the bids are for the identical solar system.



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Moving Away From Heavy Gasoline Use

By Broderick Perkins



You may have to move to get away from the high cost of gasoline. Well, you really can't get away from the high cost but a move could help you use less gas. That is, if you move to a transit oriented development (TOD).

If your next home is in a TOD community, your housing choice could help defray the cost of gasoline by lowering demand and dependency on its use while easing the environmental impact of burning fossil fuels and sprawl.

With a gallon of gasoline around the \$3.75 mark -- up more than a buck from a year ago nationwide -- a group of organizations say housing affordability isn't only a measure of what portion of your income you shell out for the mortgage and related costs, but also the cost of transportation to and from work, school, worship, shopping, medical care and the host of other destinations you regularly visit.

Simply put, the nearer you live to those destinations or the more transportation options available to you from your community, the more opportunities you'll have to spend less on petrol fueled transportation.

When the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) and Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP) last calculated the effects of gasoline costs on the household budget, gasoline was only \$1.85 a gallon nationwide, and some communities were spending as much as 20 cents on every dollar for gasoline. Imagine what a more than doubling of gas prices has done to a household budget that hasn't had the benefit of higher incomes.

That makes TODs more viable than ever, primarily for the gasoline savings, but also for a host of other reasons.

- A well-conceived and developed TOD is designed to focus compact growth around transit stops to bring riders closer to transit facilities, to encourage walkable infill development, and save land. They can be built to contain many elements of the

so-called "new urbanism" or "neo-traditionalist" developments named for a more traditional pedestrian-friendly, easy-access-to-essentials approach to development that has less impact on the infrastructure than sprawl.

- TODs are viable in both urban and suburban settings, provided development is not simply adjacent to transit, but shaped by transit in terms of parking, density, and building orientation.
- TODs provide mobility options, very much needed in the most congested metropolitan areas. This allows young people, the elderly, low-income people, people who prefer not to drive or own cars the ability to get around.
- TODs can lower annual household drive times by 20 percent to 40 percent for those living, working and/or shopping near transit stations. Reduced driving time means reduced driving expense to the tune of thousands of dollars a year.
- Reduced drive time also means reduced air pollution and energy consumption. TODs can reduce rates of greenhouse gas emissions by 2.5 to 3.7 tons per year for each household. Likewise, TODs typically consume less land than low-density, auto-oriented growth and it reduces the need to convert farmland and open spaces to development.
- Also, by creating active communities that are busy through the day and evening, TODs put more "eyes on the street" and that increases safety for pedestrians, transit-users, and others.

Championing the TOD cause, The Center for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is an initiative that includes input from a host of like-minded organizations including: Congress for the New Urbanism, Reconnecting America, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Surface Transportation Policy Project, and the Urban Land Institute.



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New Fed Rules To Prevent Future Runs on Bad Loans

By Broderick Perkins



Paramount in new federal regulations approved to foster more responsible mortgage lending, are the implications for consumers shopping for a home loan. The Federal Reserve Board's new rule amends the "Truth In Lending Act," Regulation Z under the "Home Ownership and Equity Protection Act (HOEPA)".

HOEPA was originally passed in 1994 to target abusive practices in home equity lending. The Fed's new move extends protections to home purchase loans.

Critics complain the rule is long over due because unfair, abusive and deceptive home mortgage lending practices get much of the blame for the current housing crisis that has already put millions of properties in foreclosure and former owners on the street.

Also, most lenders long ago curtailed many of the practices now forbidden by the new regulations, critics say. The horse is already out of the barn, so to speak, and the new regulations will do little to corral the market's downward stampede.

However, the new rules should help prevent future runs on bad loans by helping remove them from the market. Perhaps more important, key provisions in the new rules will give consumers cause to pause before shopping for a mortgage. Effective October 1, 2009, the new rule's four key provisions (along with how each will impact consumers), for a newly defined, but yet to be detailed category of "higher-priced mortgage loans," include protections that will:

- Prohibit a lender from making a loan without regard to borrowers' ability to repay the loan from income and assets other than the home's value.
- This forces lenders to more closely scrutinize a borrower's debt-to-income ratio, looking for less debt, more income and savings, larger down payments and other liquid assets the borrower can fall back on. Consumers may have to take more time saving and paying off debt before buying a home.
- Require creditors to verify the income and assets they rely upon to determine repayment ability.

This provision will make it especially tough for home-based business owners, self-employed people, contract workers and others who don't get a regular pay stub. Lenders were already

asking many of these borrowers for a CPA's or other tax professional's certified profit-and-loss statement to reveal income viability.

- Ban any prepayment penalty if the payment can change in the initial four years. For other higher-priced loans, a prepayment penalty period cannot last for more than two years.

Without this lender risk-reducing tool they are more likely to offer a narrower variety of loans, forcing some consumers out of the market and more of them to spend more time shopping around. Shopping around, of course, is a smart practice.

- Require creditors to establish escrow accounts for property taxes and homeowner's insurance for all first-lien mortgage loans.

This means borrowers will have to figure on paying more each month than just the home loan's principle and interest (or interest only, where available). This is actually a useful tool for borrowers, especially those who procrastinate and gamble they'll have the lump sum cash when the insurance premium or property tax comes due. Financial counselors have always advised spreading out the cost of insurance and taxes over 12 monthly payments is much easier to fit into a household budget than the lump sum risk. In addition to rules for higher priced home loans other rules include:

- Creditors and mortgage brokers are prohibited from coercing a real estate appraiser to misstate a home's value.
- Companies that service mortgage loans are prohibited from engaging in certain practices, such as pyramiding late fees. Servicers are also required to credit consumers' loan payments as of the date of receipt.
- Creditors must provide a good faith estimate of the loan costs, including a schedule of payments, within three days after a consumer applies for any mortgage loan secured by a consumer's principal dwelling, such as a home improvement loan or a loan to refinance an existing loan. Currently, early cost estimates are only required for home-purchase loans.
- The rules also specifically outlaws seven deceptive and misleading advertising and requires more extensive information about rates, monthly payments and other loan features.



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Open The Doors And Buyers Shall Come - But Prepare First!

By Phoebe Chongchua



If your home is on the market, chances are your agent will be holding an open house. Open Houses can be a great way to drive buyer traffic to your home. But most often the desire to physically come and see your home starts with a picture on the Internet.

"I have developed a proprietary way to build layers into a room to give that depth when you're putting the photo on the website," says Christine Rae owner of Certified Staging Professionals (CSP) and co-author of *Home Staging For Dummies*.

She says, "Curb appeal starts on the Internet so it's very important to make the pictures of your home attractive. If the Internet picture doesn't sell your home, you might not ever get the buyers to actually do a physical drive by and come inside your home.

Once you entice buyers with an eye-catching picture, then you have to keep up the good work. "Everywhere the eye rests, the sale begins. So that means everything counts: floors, walls, ceilings, windows, the stuff outside, inside, cleanliness, attention to detail," says Rae.

"The buyer is expecting something fantastic and if you've got anything less than a fantastic-looking property, you're less likely to get the offer that you're looking for," explains Rae.

Rae shares a few tricks of the trade to help you before you hold an open house.

Target your buyers.

Rae says target the buyers you think are most likely to buy your home. That means paying attention to economic trends in your market. Also, when advertising, feature the items that are likely to attract the targeted buyers.

For example, "there's a big demographic growing for single women buying homes. They bought 20 percent of the homes last year and that's a growing trend. You've got to target what's appealing to them such as building in a security system - - a very crucial element to selling that home to them," says Rae.

Energy efficiency can help sell your home.

"Anytime you can bring light into a house, that is going to make people feel good," says Rae.

That's why agents typically open curtains and blinds and turn on all the lights before a showing. It's a simple thing to change all the light bulbs to energy-efficient light bulbs. "By 2010, North American energy costs are going to rise 50 percent. Who would not want a more energy-efficient home? If you're focusing on energy-efficiency, that's going to help the buyer buy your house," says Rae.

Rae says the energy-efficient light bulbs in a daylight finish are great for helping show off your home. "Daylight bulbs, when they are placed in retail stores, increase retail sales by 40 percent. That reduces energy costs and increases sales; so doesn't that make sense that it's going to have a dynamic effect when you put it into a domestic home?" says Rae.

Good sound system? Then play music.

"You have to target the buyer. It can't be elevator music and it can't be funeral music or rock - generally an easy-listening good sound track lifts spirits. People are always apprehensive when they are looking at houses. They feel like they are prying into somebody else's house. So, make your house not feel like that," says Rae.

Remember, that buyers need to feel comfortable when viewing your home. Don't cook anything the night before that might permeate through the entire house and leave a pungent odor. Put away personal items. Get the dog out of the house and roll out the welcome mat!

"A buyer doesn't want to feel like a guest in your home so you have to remove anything that would cause any trepidation," says Rae.

Invite your neighbors over for a preview. You never know who your neighbors know. They might have the perfect buyer for your home. So, open the doors and invite buyers into your home, not as guests but as potential homeowners and watch the offers roll in.



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Investor Report: Hidden Tax Pitfall

By Kenneth R. Harney



Here's a tax alert for real estate investors who use popular tax-free exchanges: The recently signed federal housing legislation contains a hidden zinger that could cost you thousands of dollars if you don't plan around it.

As of next January 1st, investors who exchange into rental or second home properties that they later convert into their personal homes no longer will be eligible for the full \$250,000 to \$500,000 tax-free exclusions now available on sales of principal residences.

Instead, they'll need to allocate their time of ownership between taxable investment or second home usage and non-taxable principal residential usage.

To qualify for tax-free exclusions they'll still need to use a property as their primary home for two out of the five years preceding any sale or exchange. But if any part of their total usage time after January 1st is what the new law calls "nonqualified" -- that is, investment, rental or second home use -- then that will lower their maximum exclusion.

This is an especially big deal for investors using "Section 1031" exchanges because they frequently shield their real estate gains on rental houses and condos by moving into them for a couple of years and converting previously taxable gains into non-taxable principal residential profits.

Just how popular has that technique been in recent years? "Extremely popular," says tax-free exchange intermediary George Foss in Littleton, New Hampshire. "Many of my clients have used it because it's a way to totally shield yourself" from capital gains taxation.

Congress's new limitation of the strategy is "terrible in my opinion," said Foss. "It's just rotten."

An example of the dollars and cents impact of the change was provided by the Federation of Exchange Accommodators, a national trade group representing investors and intermediaries. Under the old law, an investor could exchange into a property that he or she then rents out for three years. Then the investor would move in and use the property as a principal residence for two years.

When the investor -- who is single -- sold the house for a \$300,000 gain, \$250,000 of that amount would be tax-free under the old law.

Under the new law, three fifths of that gain -- \$180,000 out of the \$300,000 -- would be taxable, while just \$120,000 would be tax free.

That \$130,000 difference is why exchange investors are so upset with Congress's latest tax increase.



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Don't Overlook The Garage When Getting Your Home Ready To Sell

By Phoebe Chongchua



There's a lot of talk about curb appeal being the driving force drawing buyers into your home. It makes sense. If the house looks a mess from the outside, what buyer would want to set foot inside? Well, maybe your house isn't quite a mess. You have taken the time to fix-up the landscape, power-washed the house, and even painted the mailbox. But did you overlook what can be the biggest eyesore -- the garage? "It's the largest architectural element on the house. So it really, in this day and age, is impossible to dismiss the garage door as an important architectural element," says Braden Wasserman, owner of Access Custom Garage Doors.

But the garage door is more than an architectural element. It can be a trigger point for buyers. They're driving down the street in a tract-home neighborhood and suddenly they spot a custom wooden garage door. It's striking and different and often gives them reason to stop and take a closer look, maybe even come inside.

"If you have a house that has a nice garage door, it sets the stage for the fact that everything else in the house is going to have attention to detail and it really does differentiate homes that are on the same street," says Wasserman. He says with some exterior paint and a unique garage door, "The house really becomes a semi-custom house."

According to Wasserman, swapping out an old steel-style, raised-panel garage door that once was so very traditional is a huge improvement to a home.

"It was interesting that you would go past these \$5 or \$6 million houses where the architects and designers paid such critical attention to detail to the stucco color, the stonework, and the rooftop. Then for the biggest element, they would just put this wide raised-panel steel door because the consumer wasn't educated on how important the garage door can be in really just buttoning up and completing the design of a house," says Wasserman. However, these days, custom wooden doors aren't just for multi-million dollar homes. People in tract homes are making the switch either for their own benefit, a faster sale, or a potential gain in the value of the property.

"There is definitely an increase in the property value commensurate with the investment that you make in the garage door. And then there is the perceived value. For every \$5,000 of door that you put in, you get four times that dollar in perceived

value," says Wasserman. What makes wooden garage doors so special is not only the escape from conformity but also the fact that they function like traditional automated steel doors.

"They work exactly like a standard upward-acting sectional garage door. They segment on a track and they use a conventional residential garage door opener. Only from the front elevation do we try to design the doors to look like they're the old fashion carriage garage doors that swing open," explains Wasserman.

The added decorative hardware, including handles and hinges, helps create the effect of an old-fashioned-garage door. But not every garage door works with every style of home. Wasserman says you should really take a close look at your architectural style before you decide on the right garage door. He says homeowners should match their home architecture to a garage door that is architecturally congruent.

"That way you're making the whole house just look that much more custom and fitted," says Wasserman.

Then next vital thing to look for in custom doors is to choose the appropriate material.

"It's very, very critical that the lumber you select is designed and can last and can be durable for an exterior application," says Wasserman. He says typically that lumber would be mahogany, cedar, or redwood. Teak also works well outside but is very expensive.

You should also note that with wooden garage doors there may be a little more maintenance depending on how much sun exposure the door gets. Wasserman recommends using a resin-based product to finish the garage door rather than a varnish. "A varnish is a really difficult product to maintain because when it fails, you have to strip the wood back down to the bare wood and you have to re-start the process from scratch and that becomes cost-prohibitive for these doors," explains Wasserman. Resin-based products are easier to clean. New product can also be applied directly over the old.

Whether or not you decide to replace your garage door, it's important to make sure it at least is working properly.

The key concept to remember is that a garage door shouldn't just house your car and all your stuff that won't fit in your home. Instead it should help to entice buyers to want to see more of the house.



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