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BAY AREA HOME SALES ROSE IN DECEMBER

TAMPA - Home sales in the Bay area rose more in December than any month since the downturn began.

It's a sign that sales prices, which continue to plummet, are enticing buyers.

The number of existing homes sold in December in the metro area of Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater jumped 16 percent compared with December 2007. Sales increased to 1,857, up from 1,597, according to the Florida Association of Realtors.

Sales were up 3 percent in November compared with November 2007.

The median sales price, however, fell 27 percent to \$145,700. It was \$199,800 in December 2007.

Statewide, sales increased 27 percent and prices decreased the same amount.

In Orlando, the Florida market most like Tampa's, sales rose 34 percent to 1,535. Prices fell 26 percent to \$167,800.

The sales increase is good news, but falling prices could hinder the recovery of the overall economy, said Lawrence Yun, chief economist for the National Association of Realtors. He has called on lawmakers to include tax credits for homebuyers in the economic recovery package being considered by Congress.

"The economy just simply cannot recover as long as home prices continue to decline," he said.

Nationally, December sales rose an unexpected 6.5 percent compared with November but were down 3.5 percent from December 2007, according to the Realtor's group.

The nationwide median sales price was \$175,400, down 15.5 percent from \$207,000 for December 2007. That was the lowest price since May 2003 and the biggest year-to-year drop in records going back to 1968.

For all of 2008, there were 4.9 million existing home sales, down more than 13 percent from a year earlier and the lowest total since 1997.

One encouraging sign: The number of unsold homes in the nation fell nearly 12 percent in December to 3.7 million. At the current sales pace, it would take 9.3 months to sell all the properties, down from 11.2 months in November.

Information from The Associated Press was used in this report. Reporter Shannon Behnken can be reached at (813) 259-7804.

Snowbirds Should Find Lower Property Tax Bills This Year

MANATEE COUNTY, Fla. – Jan. 21, 2009 – Florida snowbirds, so long left out in the cold when it comes to lower taxes, may find their property tax bills falling this year – along with real estate market values.

“The people with the biggest break this year will be non-homesteaded property owners whose values dropped,” said Dale Friedley, a tax analyst with the Manatee County Property Appraiser’s Office.

“In most cases those values are dropping between 8 and 15 percent. If their values went down 10 percent and millage is the same, they’ll save 10 percent, compared to last year’s bill,” Friedley added.

About 95 percent of Manatee nonhomesteaders will likely pay less on their tax bills this year, Friedley estimated, assuming that the millage rates stay the same. About 78 percent of homesteaded owners saw actual savings last year on their tax assessments, though maybe not as much as they would have liked.

A state rule passed in 1995 requires assessed property values to grow by 3 percent or by the Consumer Price Index, whichever is less, as long as the property’s market value doesn’t dip below the assessed value.

That means even homeowners whose property’s market value dropped over the past year might see lower savings or even a slight increase in their taxes, he said, adding that’s especially true for valuable homes.

“Generally, if you’re just looking at your tax bill, this will probably be the first good year for snowbirds in awhile,” said Kurt Wenner, director of tax research for Florida TaxWatch, a nonprofit research foundation.

“Snowbirds are probably going to see a reduction in their taxes, or at least are not going to grow at the rate they’ve been growing,” he added. “The tax shift occurred over the last 15 years, it might be a little shifted back this year.”

“This could be the first year where people under Save Our Homes taxes go up, and people with non-homestead properties go down,” said Wenner.

Still, it all depends upon what local government decides when it comes to setting millage rates, Wenner emphasized. The higher the amount of revenue government requires, the more taxpayers can expect to pay, he noted.

Voters overwhelmingly approved Amendment 1 last year. It effectively doubled the homestead exemption on nonschool taxes for primary homeowners to \$50,000; made the Save Our Homes tax protection more portable; and created a \$25,000 tax break on tangible personal property for businesses. Amendment 1

also placed a 10 percent cap on yearly increases in assessments for nonhomesteaded properties, saving snowbirds from the astronomical tax increases they'd seen in years past.

However, the 10 percent cap this year may seem irrelevant to snowbirds, since values for most of them are dropping.

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FAR Releases Latest Report on Florida Home Buyers and Sellers

ORLANDO, Fla. – Jan. 6, 2009 – What did the typical Florida homebuyer look like in 2008? The answer lies within the pages of the 2008 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers Florida Report released by FAR and compiled by NAR, which is now available at floridarealtors.org.

Because the real estate market evolves, it's important for real estate professionals to have a clear picture of today's home buyers and sellers. The 2008 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers describes the characteristics and motivations of recent home buyers and sellers in Florida to help real estate professionals track the changing demands of consumers in a dynamic market.

Home sellers and their selling experience

- The median age of home sellers was 52 years; they had a median income of \$80,600.
- Sixty-nine percent of home sellers were married and 72 percent had no children under 18 years old living at home.
- Thirty-eight percent of sellers traded up to a larger home when purchasing their next home.
- The typical home seller owned their home for 6 years.
- The typical home was on the market for 12 weeks. Thirty-one percent of home sellers did not reduce their asking price before their home sold.
- Recent sellers typically sold their homes for 92 percent of the listing price.
- Forty-four percent of sellers offered incentives to attract buyers, most often assistance with closing costs and home warranty policies.
- Eighty-five percent of sellers used an agent or broker to sell their home.
- Forty-nine percent of all sellers were very satisfied with the selling process.

Home sellers and real estate professional

- Fifty-seven percent of sellers contacted only one agent before selecting one to help assist in the sale of their home.
- When selecting a real estate professional, 38 percent of sellers received a recommendation from a friend, neighbor or relative.
- The reputation of the agent was the most important factor when choosing a

real estate professional for 34 percent of recent sellers.

- Nineteen percent of sellers used the same agent for their home purchase.
- For 23 percent of sellers, their most important expectation was that the real estate agent would help price home competitively; 24 percent reported that their most important expectation was that the agent help sell the home within a specific timeframe.
- Ninety percent of sellers reported their home was listed or advertised on the Internet.
- Seventy-nine percent of sellers used an agent that provided a broad range of services and managed most aspects of the sales transaction.
- Sixty-four percent of sellers reported they would definitely use the same real estate agent again.

For sale by owner sellers (FSBO)

- Twelve percent of sellers sold their home without the assistance of an agent compared with 13 percent of sellers nationally. Among all sellers, 5 percent were FSBO sellers who knew the buyer.
- Fifty-nine percent of FSBO sellers reported that they had some difficulty in selling their home themselves, in performing tasks such as understanding and performing the necessary paperwork to complete the transaction, preparing the home for sale, and getting the price right.

To download the 23-page 2008 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers Florida Report in PDF format, visit [floridarealtors.org](http://www.floridarealtors.org) at:

<http://www.floridarealtors.org/LegislativeCenter/Research/index.cfm> © 2009

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FACING STIFF COMPETITION?

Traditional home sellers can face stiff competition from foreclosures in the current market. But homeowners can take action to make their properties more attractive to buyers - like apply fresh paint, clean and declutter - especially since many purchasers aren't interested in bank-owned properties, which can be in poor condition.

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HOME SELLERS: HOME VALUE BELIEFS

Despite evidence of declining home prices nationwide, many homeowners cling to the belief that their home is gaining value or at least holding its own. Real estate professionals across the country report difficulty convincing sellers of the true market value of their homes, which is playing a part in keeping the market from finding a bottom. FLORIDA ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®

Sell Short, Refinance, BUT Try Not to Lose Your Home

ORLANDO, Fla. – Jan. 13, 2009 – Every day, hundreds of people in Florida continue to slip into the foreclosure whirlpool and spiral downward toward the day they may have to leave their home. What should you do if you are on the verge of getting a foreclosure notice?

First and foremost, industry specialists say, you should resist the natural human tendency to freeze up. Face the issue head on and prepare for days and weeks of making phone calls and corresponding with people who may be able to help.

“Don’t assume it’s too late to act,” said Ralph Roberts, a consumer advocate in Michigan and co-author of *Foreclosure Self-Defense for Dummies*. “As long as you are residing in the home, you probably have some opportunity to keep your home.”

Roberts, a Realtor who lost his home to foreclosure back in the 1970s, said people facing foreclosure have more avenues to pursue than they might realize – certainly more than the typical “pay up or move out” that many people think is their only choice.

Potential solutions include:

- Negotiating a modification of the loan.
- Refinancing the loan.
- Listing the home through an agent for a possible “short sale.”
- Selling the home to an investor on your own.
- Declaring bankruptcy.

Short sales – in which the lender agrees to take less than is owed on the home, writing off some or all of the loss to avoid the expense of a foreclosure – typically are handled by real estate agents, which at least takes some of the pressure off of a harried homeowner. Many professional real estate agents are working more short sales these days and have buyers lined up looking for bargains, though the process can be slow and frustrating.
