

Current Trends, Insights & What to Expect in Early 2026

THE BUYER'S ADVANTAGE:



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 **HOMESMART**

The Truth About Down Payments

True:

Many buyers don't put down 20%, especially first-time home buyers.

VS

False:

"I must put down 20% of the purchase price in order for a seller to accept my offer!"

The Median Down Payment for First-Time Buyers Is Less Than 20%

You're not required to put that much down, some loan programs allow down payments as low as 3.5%, and a few even offer 0% down.

Research shows that nearly 80% of first-time buyers are eligible for down payment assistance, yet only about 13% actually use these programs.

On average, these programs offer around \$18,000 in assistance.



The \$416 Shift in Affordability

If rising interest rates or home prices put your moving plans on hold, now may be the right moment to revisit the math. Buyer affordability is improving across most of the country, specifically in 39 of the top 50 housing markets, marking the seventh consecutive month where purchasing a home has become more manageable.

Instead of speaking in headlines and percentages, let's translate what this shift actually means for you. When we break it down into real numbers, you can clearly see how these changes impact your buying power and what they could mean for your next move.

Monthly Mortgage Costs Are Easing

One of the most noticeable changes showing up right now is what buyers are paying each month. Recent data from Redfin indicates that the typical mortgage payment on a median-priced home has dropped meaningfully, about \$416 less per month compared to just a few months ago.

That kind of reduction can make a real difference in day-to-day budgeting and overall affordability. Below, you can see how this downward shift in payments is starting to open doors again for buyers who felt priced out earlier this year.

Significant Decrease in Mortgage Payments Over 7 Months

Average Monthly Mortgage Payment Trend



When you step back and look at the math, the impact becomes pretty clear. A few hundred dollars less each month doesn't just feel good now, it adds up to close to \$5,000 a year in real savings.

No, that alone won't magically make every home affordable. But in real life, homebuying decisions often come down to comfort. That extra breathing room can be the difference between stretching your budget and feeling confident that your payment actually fits your lifestyle.

It can also change what's possible in your home search. According to Redfin, a buyer working with a \$3,000 monthly housing budget can now qualify for a home priced around \$468,000, roughly \$22,000 more than just a few months ago. That expanded range could be the reason you finally find a home that checks the boxes instead of settling for one that doesn't.

Why This Is Happening

Two major shifts are working together right now:

- Mortgage rates have pulled back from their earlier highs
- Home price growth has slowed in many areas

Together, those changes are easing pressure on buyers and improving overall affordability. As Andy Walden, Head of Mortgage and Housing Market Research at Intercontinental Exchange, recently explained, the drop in rates has created momentum for buyers and homeowners alike, pushing affordability to its strongest level in more than two years.

Whether you're buying your first home or planning your next move into something larger, these shifts could be what turns your plans back on. A quick conversation with a knowledgeable lender or agent can show you exactly what today's numbers look like for you.

Sometimes the difference between "maybe later" and "let's do this" is simply seeing the math laid out clearly.

Good News for Buyers: More Homes to Choose From

It's no secret that the last few years have been tough for buyers. But right now, there's a major upside making it easier to find a home within your budget: inventory levels are improving.

Inventory Is Rising Nationwide

Buyers are finally seeing more options, and it's happening across the entire country. New data from Realtor.com shows that the supply of homes for sale has climbed meaningfully in every major region of the U.S.

Compared to this time last year, inventory is up at least 8% nationwide. The biggest jump is in the West, where the number of available homes has surged by nearly 18% year over year. That kind of increase can dramatically change the experience for buyers who felt stuck with limited choices before.

More homes on the market means less pressure, fewer rushed decisions, and a better chance of finding a property that actually fits your needs, not just the only one available. For many buyers, this shift alone is enough to make the market feel approachable again.



Inventory Gains Aren't Even Everywhere

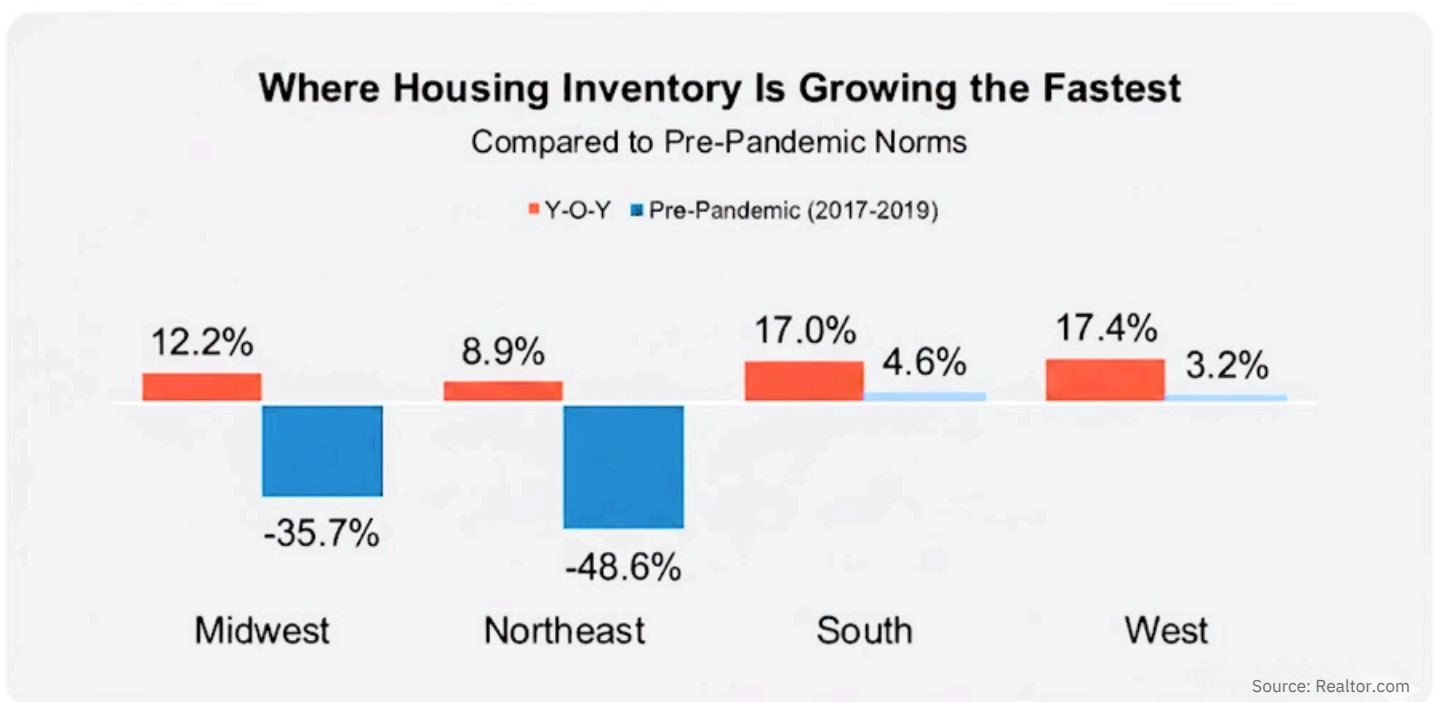
While housing supply is improving nationwide, the pace of that improvement looks very different depending on where you're shopping, and even which neighborhood you're focused on. The chart below highlights those differences clearly.

Across the board, inventory has increased recently (shown in blue). But the added color tells a deeper story by comparing today's levels to what a more balanced market looked like before the pandemic, roughly 2017–2019.

Here's how to read what's happening:

- South and West (green bars): In many of these markets, inventory has fully rebounded, and in some cases exceeded, pre-pandemic norms. With more homes available, sellers may be more open to negotiations, concessions, or flexible terms.
- Northeast and Midwest (red bars): Even with recent gains, supply in these regions is still tighter than what would be considered normal. In these areas, competition can remain strong, and buyers are often better served by coming in with a clean, competitive offer from the start.

Market conditions are becoming more buyer-friendly overall, but strategy still matters. Where you're buying plays a huge role in how much leverage you have, and that's why local insight is more important than ever.

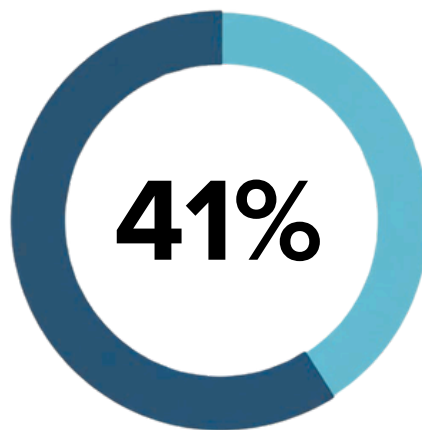


Why New Construction Could Be a Strong Play Right Now

If you're hoping to lower your monthly payment, secure a better interest rate, or stretch your buying power further, there's one option that deserves a closer look: newly built homes. That's a big reason more buyers are shifting their attention toward new construction, and it has very little to do with trendy finishes or modern layouts.

The real advantage right now? The deals.

Builders are sitting on more completed and near-complete homes than they've had in years. That increased supply gives buyers leverage in two important ways: more homes to choose from, and more motivation for builders to move inventory before starting their next phase. As a result, many builders are rolling out aggressive incentives to get homes sold. We're talking about meaningful perks like price reductions, mortgage rate buydowns, and assistance with closing costs, benefits that can have an immediate impact on affordability. It's no surprise that buyers took notice. By fall of 2025, new home sales reached their strongest pace in more than two years as buyers recognized the opportunity and acted on it.



of builders cut prices.
A record high.

Builders Are Adjusting Prices, and Expectations

According to data from the National Association of Home Builders, incentives are now the norm rather than the exception. Roughly 65% of builders are offering some type of buyer incentive, the highest share seen in the past five years.

One of the most common strategies? Price cuts. About 41% of builders have reduced prices outright, signaling a greater willingness to negotiate than many buyers might expect. When combined with financing incentives, this can significantly increase what your budget can accomplish.

The takeaway is simple: if you're open to a newly built home, your money may go further than you think. An experienced local agent can help you identify which builders are offering the strongest incentives, and which opportunities make the most sense for your goals.

In today's market, new construction isn't just about something new. It's about finding value where sellers are most motivated.



Builders Are Sweetening the Deal With Lower Rates

Here's a detail many buyers miss: purchasing a newly built home can come with a lower mortgage rate than buying a resale. Builders are actively using financing incentives to keep homes moving, and one of the most powerful tools they're offering right now is a rate buydown.

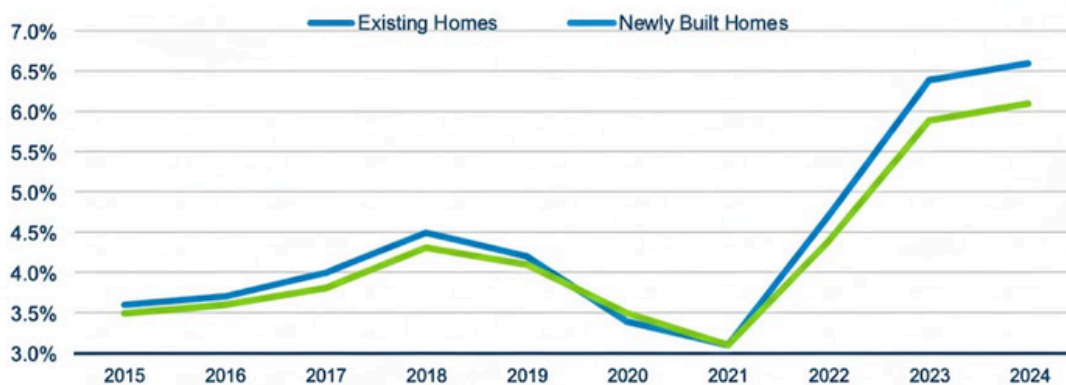
These incentives allow buyers to lock in a reduced interest rate, which can translate into noticeable monthly savings—often making a new home more affordable than an older one at the same price point.

According to data from Realtor.com, during 2023 and 2024, buyers who chose new construction secured mortgage rates that were about 0.50% lower on average than those purchasing existing homes. That difference may sound small, but over time it can have a meaningful impact on both monthly payments and total interest paid.

If high rates or tight monthly payments have kept you on the sidelines, new construction incentives could be the opening you've been waiting for. Between price adjustments and rate support, these offers can make the numbers work in ways that weren't possible before—and that's something worth paying attention to.

Buying a Newly Built Home Could Come with a Lower Mortgage Rate

Average 30-Year Mortgage Rates by Home Type



Source: Realtor.com

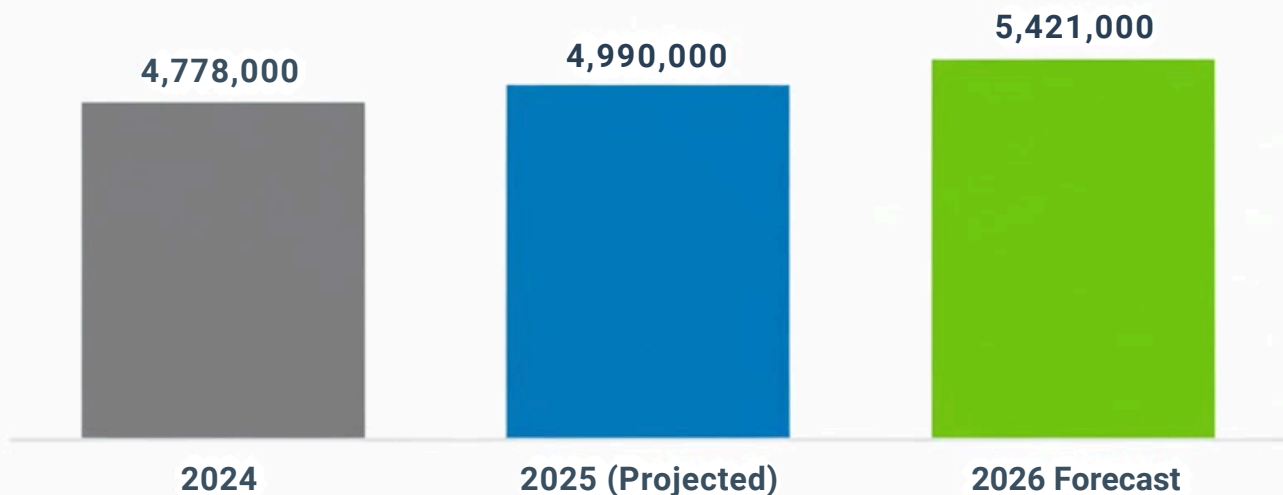
What Experts Are Saying About the 2026 Housing Market

After several years of uncertainty and hesitation, 2026 is shaping up to be a turning point for the housing market. Momentum that stalled due to higher rates and affordability challenges is expected to pick up, and industry forecasts suggest more homeowners and buyers will be ready to make moves again. As confidence improves and conditions stabilize, increased mobility could bring more homes to the market, more choices for buyers, and a healthier flow of activity overall. If you've been waiting for a sign that the market may finally be shifting, this could be it.

A market that's been idling may soon start moving again—and that renewed activity could create opportunities for buyers and sellers who are prepared. For many people, 2026 may be the year a long-delayed move finally becomes realistic.

Home Sales Are Expected To Rise

Total Home Sales Forecasts



Sources: Fannie Mae, MBA, NAR

Mortgage Rates May Keep Moving Lower

For most buyers, nothing has mattered more than where mortgage rates are headed. After topping out near 7% in early 2025, rates have generally been drifting downward—and current projections suggest that trend could continue into 2026.

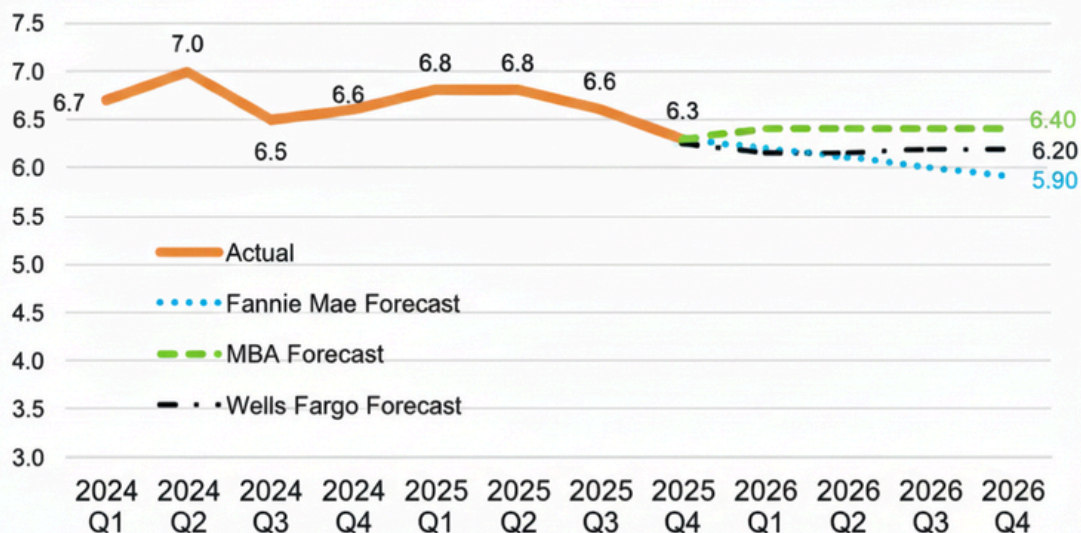
That said, experts aren't calling for a dramatic drop. Instead, the expectation is gradual improvement, with some ups and downs along the way as new economic data is released. Short-term fluctuations are likely, but the broader direction still points slightly.

Here's the part that often gets overlooked: rates don't need to fall dramatically to make a difference. Even a modest decline can noticeably reduce your monthly payment. When you compare today's rates to where they were around 7%, many buyers are already looking at hundreds of dollars in monthly savings compared to earlier this year.

That kind of change can be enough to shift affordability, expand your buying power, or simply make a payment feel more comfortable. While patience still matters, the progress so far is meaningful—and it's already helping some buyers move forward with confidence.

Mortgage Rates Could Ease in the Year Ahead

The 30-Year Fixed Rate and Rate Projections



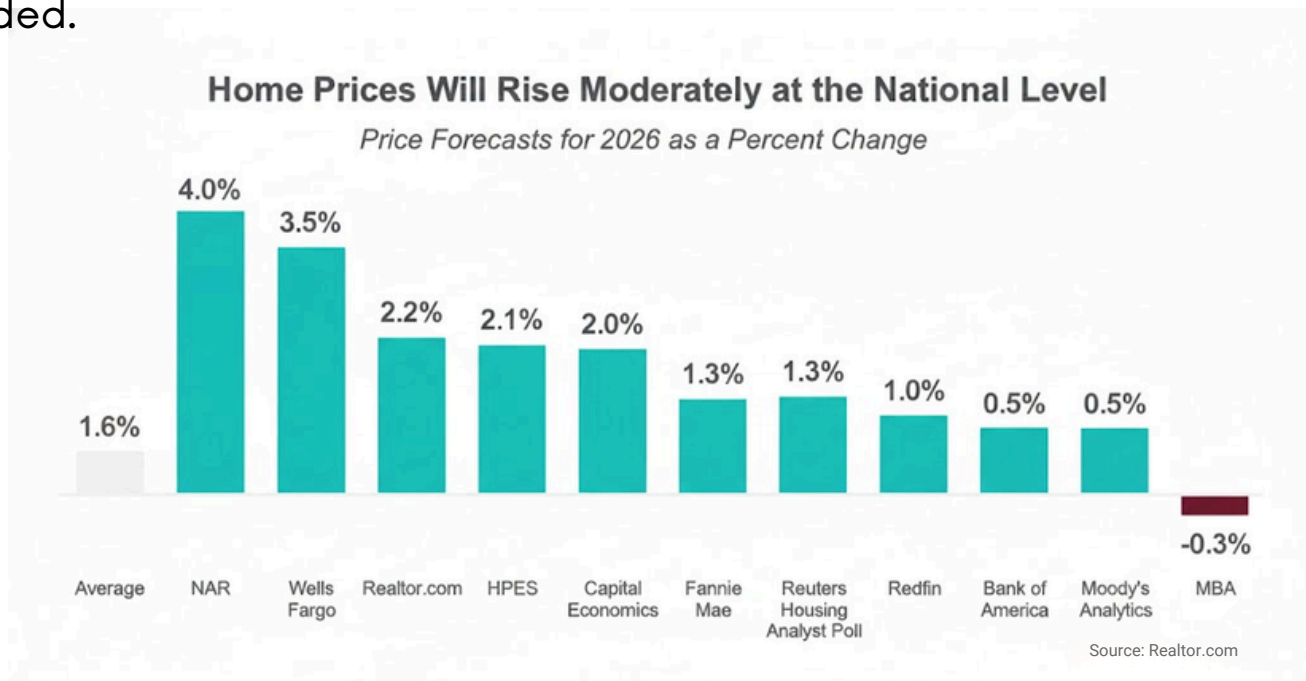
Fannie Mae, MBA, NAR

Home Prices Are Expected To Rise at a Healthier Pace

When it comes to home prices, the outlook for the year ahead is far more balanced than what we've seen in recent cycles. National forecasts point to continued price growth, but at a much slower and more sustainable rate. As mortgage rates have eased from their early-2025 highs, more buyers are beginning to step back into the market. That renewed demand helps support prices and puts a floor under values—even in areas where prices have softened slightly. In other words, while some markets may experience small dips, a widespread price collapse simply isn't expected.

It's also important to keep recent history in mind. Home values surged dramatically over the past five years. Because of that, even markets seeing modest pullbacks today are still well above where they were just a few years ago.

That said, real estate is always local. Inventory levels, buyer demand, and regional job growth will all influence how prices behave in individual cities and neighborhoods. Areas with more homes for sale may see flatter appreciation, while tighter markets could still experience stronger gains. Prices are expected to move up nationally, but without the runaway spikes of the past. For buyers, that means less pressure to rush. For homeowners, it means values are projected to remain stable and continue growing—just at a pace that's far more grounded.



How Changing Mortgage Rates Affect Your Monthly Payment

Home Loan Amount	Fixed Mortgage Interest Rate	Monthly Mortgage P&I*	Monthly Savings Compared to 7.5%
\$250,000	7.5%	\$1,748	-
	7.0%	\$1,663	\$85
	6.5%	\$1,580	\$168
	6.0%	\$1,499	\$249
\$450,000	7.5%	\$3,146	-
	7.0%	\$2,994	\$152
	6.5%	\$2,844	\$302
	6.0%	\$2,698	\$448
\$650,000	7.5%	\$4,545	-
	7.0%	\$4,324	\$221
	6.5%	\$4,108	\$437
	6.0%	\$3,897	\$648



Top Reasons To Own

Accomplishment



Feeling proud of your achievement

Stability



Locking in a large portion of your monthly housing payment with a fixed-rate mortgage

Appreciation



Home values usually rise, and that makes owning a home a good investment

Wealth Building



Growing your net worth as your home value climbs and you pay down your mortgage

Tax Benefits



Getting a tax break, if your situation applies. Talk to your accountant or financial advisor to learn more.

What's the top reason you'd love to own a home?

The Biggest Mistakes Buyers Are Making Today

1. Waiting for the “Perfect” Moment

A lot of buyers are hitting pause, hoping for home prices or mortgage rates to drop. But here’s the truth, trying to time the market is like trying to predict the weather months in advance. There are just too many moving parts.

Rick Sharga, CEO of CJ Patrick Company, says it best:

“Don’t try to time the market , it rarely works with stocks, and almost never works when it comes to buying a house. Only buy what you can reasonably afford given whatever the current market conditions are.”

In other words, focus on what you can control, your budget, your goals, and your timeline. If it makes sense for you now, that's what matters most.

2. Stretching Your Budget Too Far

It’s easy to fall in love with a home that pushes your budget, but just because a lender says you can borrow a certain amount doesn’t mean you should. When you factor in rising costs like insurance, taxes, and maintenance, overextending can create serious stress later on.

Bankrate gives solid advice:

“Focus on what monthly payment you can afford rather than fixating on the maximum loan amount you qualify for.”

Stick to what fits comfortably within your budget, not just what looks good on paper. Long-term peace of mind beats short-term pressure every time.



3. Overlooking Financial Assistance

A lot of buyers assume they're on their own when it comes to upfront costs, but that's not always true. There are programs out there designed to help with down payments, closing costs, and more. The problem? Most people don't even know they exist.

Realtor.com reports that nearly 80% of first-time buyers qualify for down payment assistance, but only 13% actually use it. That's a huge missed opportunity.

Talk to a trusted lender or agent. Whether it's your first home or your fifth, you could be leaving money on the table.

4. Skipping the Experts

This might be the most important mistake to avoid: trying to go it alone. The homebuying process is complicated, and having the right team in your corner, an experienced agent, lender, and advisor, can save you time, stress, and money. A great pro will guide you around common pitfalls, help you understand your options, and make sure you're making smart moves at every step. Don't wing it, lean on the people who do this every single day.



Top 5 Reasons You Need an Agent When Buying a Home

If you're thinking about buying a home, here's the truth: having a great agent by your side isn't just helpful, it's a game-changer. Here are five key reasons why working with a pro makes all the difference:

1. You Get a True Expert in Your Corner

Buying a home is a big move, and the process is always evolving. A great agent knows the latest rules, trends, and tools, and they'll walk you through every step. You don't need to figure it all out alone.

2. They Know Your Local Market Inside and Out

An agent doesn't just show you homes, they help you understand your market. They know what's selling, what's sitting, and where the opportunities are. They'll help you cut through the noise and focus on what really matters for your goals.

3. They'll Help You Make the Right Offer

What's the home really worth? Is the price fair? Could there be hidden issues? An experienced agent will help you figure out how to structure a strong, smart offer, without overpaying or missing something important.

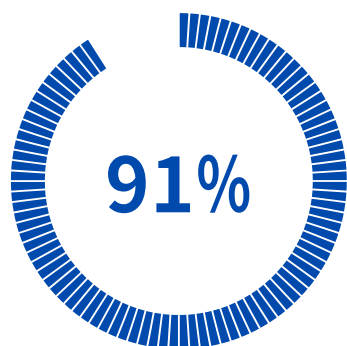
4. They Handle the Contracts and the Fine Print

Real estate comes with a lot of paperwork, and it's full of terms, deadlines, and disclosures you don't want to overlook. Your agent will make sure you know exactly what you're signing and why it matters.

5. They're Your Negotiator and Advocate

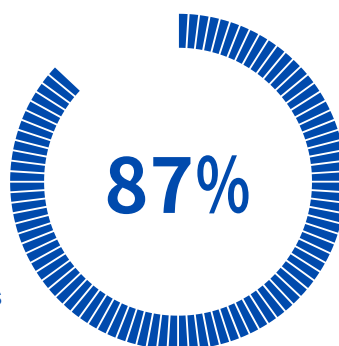
From the first offer to the final walkthrough, your agent is your voice. They'll negotiate on your behalf, manage communication with the seller's side, and protect your interests every step of the way.

Bottom line? Buying a home is too important to do alone. The right agent isn't just a guide, they're your partner in getting it done right.



Of respondents agree "It would be **very stressful** to navigate the home buying process without a real estate agent or broker."

Source: Bright MLS



Of respondents believe "A real estate agent or broker is an **essential, trusted advisor** for a homebuyer."

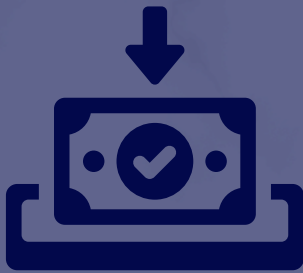
Things To Avoid After Applying for a Mortgage



Don't change bank accounts.



Don't apply for new credit or close any credit accounts.



Don't deposit cash into your accounts before speaking with your bank or lender.



Don't co-sign other loans for anyone.



Don't make any large purchases.

The best plan is to fully disclose and discuss your intentions with your lender before you do anything financial in nature.

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