

Valley of the Sun Real Estate Update

July, 2003

How to Buy a House, Part One

How to be a good home-shopper

Buying a home can be a lengthy procedure. From the point you first start thinking about a move, to finding a property, writing an offer, going through inspections, and closing the sale, it can be many months before you actually move in to your new home. For some people, the sheer magnitude of the process can be daunting. Over the next few newsletters, we will try to break that big process down into a few smaller sections, and try to make each step a bit simpler to understand. This month we will look at some of the factors that influence your home search. Subsequent newsletters will examine the contract negotiation phase, the inspection process, and maybe some follow-up questions.

Once you have decided that you will be shopping for a new home, there are several steps you can take to help the process go smoothly. The first priority is to determine what your schedule is. Do you have a lease that is expiring, or kids who want to finish the school year before moving? Will you be starting a new job, or having a family member move in with you? It usually takes from 4 to 6 weeks from the time you find the home you want until the sale is complete and you can move in, so it is important to start hunting soon enough to allow plenty of time for the process to come to a successful conclusion.

The next step is one that many people leave until the end, but deserves much more advance planning: talking to a lender. It is all too common for buyers to find a house and write an offer, and only then to start exploring their loan options. In those circumstances, you can find yourself tied to a property that you cannot really afford. It is much better to begin interviewing lenders at the beginning of your search. That way you can be confident that the price range you establish will be appropriate for your financial situation. Also, with the wide variety of mortgage plans that are available now, you may need to speak to a few lenders before finding the one who is best for you. Finally, having a Conditional Loan Approval from a lender will make any offer that you write stronger.

It is also important to understand what your goals are for the move. You may take a very different approach to your search if you are planning to live in the home for 3 years, 5 years, 10 years or more. Because repair and upgrade projects typically improve the value of a home by only about 50% of the cost of the work, short-term owners usually do better by shopping for homes that will need little work. Long-term owners, on the other hand, have plenty of time to get value out of projects through both their own use and enjoyment, as well as appreciation of property values over time. The length of time you will be in a home can also affect the type of mortgage you will want—fixed rate vs. adjustable, 15 year vs. 30 year, etc.

Knowing your goals also helps you determine what features will be important to you in a home. If your family is expanding, you may need a certain number of bedrooms, or want to avoid homes with pools.

If you are planning on establishing a home office, you will need to be sure there is a good place to set up a desk or two, and plenty of space for storage. Do you have fond memories of growing up in a two-story home, or do you have a family member who has trouble with stairs? Do you need a yard for kids or pets? Of course, if you are going to be a short-term owner, you may be able to compromise on your wish-list of features more readily than if you are looking for a home to be in for many years.

Having an idea of the area you want to live in will also be a big help. You may have a job that you want to move closer to, a school district that is important to you, or community features that are appealing. Do you want easy freeway access, mountain views, or a historic district? There may be areas you want to avoid, such as airports, farmlands, or industrial neighborhoods. You may also find that your desired features and price range combine to make some areas more reasonable targets than others.

It may seem that trying to keep all this information in mind when you begin to look for a house is making things more complicated, not simpler. But all these issues and more will inevitably come up during your home search, and the more you can do to address them at the start, the better you will be able to handle the unpredictable turns that will show up on the road to your new home. If this all still seems daunting to you, remember that there is one additional step that can substantially lighten the burden of shopping for a new home: finding a qualified real estate agent with whom you can establish a good working relationship. It is an agent's job to help you explore the many influences on your home search, and to help you evaluate the pros and cons of different options. Taking the time to sit down with an agent at the beginning of your search can save you a lot of time down the road, and lead to a much smoother transaction from start to finish.

On the Home Front

June was supposed to be a pretty quiet month for us. Hah. Ken has been busier than ever at work, and Jill has been trying to balance the demands of the re-hab schedule for her knee and her ever-growing business, plus picking up the slack around the house since Ken has been gone so much. The dogs have been content, though, since we have had a steady stream of canine house guests to keep them entertained. We also enjoyed a visit from a 2-legged friend, as Brian Smith was in town from London for an extended vacation. Time continues to fly by much too quickly, but we're having fun!

Ken Mayer

Ken@LucasRealtyGroup.com

602-750-3678

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Recipe of the Month

Chicken breasts with orange glaze

This recipe comes from a great cookbook—Betty Crocker's Cooking Basics. As with many dishes, the secret is in the sauce. This is an easy way to spice up a very simple dish.

4 skinless, boneless chicken breasts (about 1 lb)
1 tablespoon butter
1/2 teaspoon cornstarch
1/4 teaspoon ground mustard (dry)
1/4 cup orange juice
2 tablespoons orange marmalade
1 tablespoon soy sauce

1. Melt the butter in an 8-inch skillet over medium heat. Cook chicken in butter about 15 minutes, using tongs to turn the chicken over once. Chicken is done when a cut into the center of the thickest piece yields clear juice, not pink.

2. While the chicken is cooking, mix the cornstarch and mustard in a small bowl. Stir in the OJ, marmalade, and soy sauce. Mix well.

3. When the chicken is done, place it on a serving platter, and cover with aluminum foil to keep warm. Drain any excess liquid from the skillet.

4. Make the glaze by pouring the orange juice mixture into the same skillet. Bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Continue boiling and stirring for about 1 minute, until the glaze has thickened. Pour the glaze over the chicken on the serving plate.

Serve with rice and salad or fresh vegetables. Makes 4 servings, but you can easily double the recipe for larger gatherings. For variety, you can substitute apricot, peach, or lemon marmalade, or use Worcestershire instead of soy sauce for a more barbeque-like flavor.

Culture Corner

Quick reviews of some recent favorites

Food: Elephant Bar opened up by the new Chandler Mall several months ago, but I just went for the first time. The prices were much more reasonable than the exotic décor would suggest, and the portions were very generous. The menu has a nice variety of Pacific Rim items. I'd go back.

Food, again: Sunday Brunch at the Phoenician. Wow. It's not cheap—about \$55 per person—but the food is incredible. Eggs in every variety, shrimp, crab, and salmon galore, freshly grilled meat, a room full of desserts, complimentary champagne, and that's just scratching the surface.

Movies: "Dogtown and Z-Boys" documents the rise of skateboarding from a quaint hobby to a counter-culture phenomenon to a mainstream sport in just a few decades. Extensive interviews and film clips show how a small core of amazing competitors gave birth to a new sport. On DVD.

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