Lisa Baker | Coldwell Banker Realty | www.LisaBakerRealEstate.com |NJ #2186236

How to Buy a Home

1. Start Financial Preparation

Buying a house is a major commitment. Before you begin shopping for properties or comparing mortgage options, you need to make sure you're ready to be a homeowner. If you have not done so already, start saving for your down payment (*as little as 3.5% with an FHA loan, of the purchase price*) in advance of buying. Keep in mind that buying a home comes with additional expenses, so at least six months before you start shopping for a home, be sure to save 2-5% of the purchase price to cover closing costs.

A good place to begin is by calculating your debt-to income (DTI) ratio. Look at your current debts and income and consider how much money you can reasonably afford to spend each month on a mortgage payment. Now is a good time to see if you can pay off any debt and ensure all your payments are made on time.

Homeownership also comes with several costs that you do not need to worry about while renting. You will need to pay property taxes and maintain some form of homeowners insurance. Factor these expenses into your household budget when you decide how much house you can afford.

Below is a review of some of the major expenses related to a purchase and how much you might want to save for them. Other key definitions are outlined for your information as well.

Down Payment

Your down payment is a large, one-time payment toward the purchase of a home. Many lenders require a down payment because it mitigates the loss, they might suffer if a borrower defaults on their mortgage. Many home buyers believe that they need a 20% down payment to buy a home, but this is not always true. **There are down payment assistance programs offered at the state and national level that can be combined.** A down payment of that size is not likely to be realistic for many first-time home buyers.

Fortunately, there are many options for buyers who cannot afford a 20% down payment. For example, you can get a conventional loan for as little as 3% down. FHA loans have a minimum payment of 3.5%. VA loans and USDA loans even allow eligible and qualified borrowers to put 0% down.

There are advantages, however, to making a larger down payment. For one, it typically means you will have more mortgage options. It also usually means you will have a smaller monthly payment and a lower interest rate. Plus, if you put at least 20% down on a conventional loan, you will no longer need to pay for private mortgage insurance (PMI).

Closing Costs

You will also need to save money to cover closing costs, which are the fees you pay to get the loan. There are many variables that go into determining how much closing costs will be, but it is usually advisable to prepare for 3%– 6% of the total home value. This means that if you are buying a home worth $200,000, you might end up paying $6,000– $12,000 in closing costs.

The specific closing costs will depend on your loan type, your lender and where you live. Almost all homeowners will pay for things like appraisal fees and title insurance. If you take out a government-backed loan, you will typically need to pay an insurance premium or funding fee upfront. Before you close on your loan, your lender will give you a document called a Closing Disclosure, which lists each of the closing costs you need to cover and how much you will need to pay at closing. Look over your Closing Disclosure carefully before you close to know what to expect and to catch any errors.

Other Costs Based on Loan Type

Your loan type might require a specialized inspection as well. For example, you often have to get a pest inspection before you take out a VA loan. Most buyers will schedule this inspection at the same time as your home inspection.

These expenses might seem minor when held up against the other costs associated with buying a home, but they can add up, so be sure to budget wisely.

Review your credit profile ahead of time and see what you can do to raise your score (*which can get you a better interest rate*). Request copies of all your credit reports, start paying off credit card bills and resolve any discrepancies or errors.

Income And Employment Status

Your lender will need to see a work history (usually about 2 years) to make sure your income source is stable and reliable.

Preparing your income is all about pulling the right documentation together to show steady employment. If you are on payroll, you will likely just need to provide recent pay stubs and W-2s. If self-employed, you will need to submit your tax returns and other documents the lender requests.

Debt-To-Income Ratio

Debt-To-Income Ratio (DTI) is another financial instrument mortgage lenders use to evaluate your loan application. Your DTI helps your lender see how much of your monthly income goes to debt so they can evaluate the amount of mortgage debt you can take on.

DTI is calculated by dividing your monthly debt by your **gross** (*before taxes and withdrawals*) monthly income. For example, if your monthly debts (*credit card minimum payments, loan payments, etc.*) total $2,000 per month and your gross monthly income is $6,000, your DTI is $2,000/$6,000, or 33%. Your lender will use the debts shown on your credit report to calculate your DTI.

It is wise to review your DTI before you apply for a loan. In most cases, you will need a DTI of 50% or less to qualify for a mortgage, although this number varies based on your lender, loan type and other factors.

Credit Health

Your credit score plays a huge role in what loans and interest rates you qualify for. Your credit score tells lenders how risky it is to lend money to you.

Taking steps to improve your credit score and reduce your debt can pay off big as you prepare to get a mortgage. Better numbers mean better loan options with lower interest rates.

Your credit score is based on the following information:

- Your payment history (*were you late when making payments*)
- The amount of money you owe (*what % of your available credit is being used*)
- The length of your credit history (*how many years have you had the same credit card or account*)
- Types of credit you've used
- Your pursuit of new credit (how many new accounts have you opened)

Most lenders require a credit score of at least 620 to qualify for most loans. A score above 720 will generally get you the very best loan terms.

Keep in mind that you should also avoid taking out any additional loans (*large or small, this includes Amazon, and buying new furniture*) until after the home purchase is finalized as that will affect your credit score.

2. Get To Know Your Market

Start searching for homes online. Visit neighborhoods and open houses to get a feel for your market and narrow down your must-have list in terms of home type, features and location.

You will also want to become familiar with the experts in your local area who can assist you in the purchase process- specifically a real estate agent. A great real estate agent can guide you through every step and connect you with other professionals like inspectors, attorneys, and mortgage brokers or lenders.

At this point, you will also want to be aware of your spending and its impact on your credit report. Do not take out any large loans because they could lower your credit score and affect your debt-to-income ratio — a calculation that lenders use to determine how much you qualify to borrow. Any major changes related to your income or employment might also change your ability to get financing.

4-5 months before buying:

- Start looking at homes online
- Define your wants and needs
- Hire a real estate agent
- Keep track of spending and credit use

3. Get pre-approved and start searching

Choose a lender or mortgage broker to guide you through the financing process. Get pre-approved by your chosen lender so when it comes time to make an offer, sellers will know you are serious. To get pre-approved, you will need bank statements, pay stubs and tax returns. Most pre-approval letters are good for 60 to 90 days. Below are some of the loan options that a lender will help you to consider.

Conventional Loans

Conventional loans, sometimes called conforming loans, are loans that are backed by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac. The majority of mortgages in the U.S. are conventional loans. Conventional loans are always a popular option for homebuyers, and you can get one with as little as 3% down.

FHA Loans

Backed by the Federal Housing Administration, FHA loans are less risky for lenders because the government insures them if you stop making payments. As a result, FHA loans have credit score requirements that are not as strict. You can get an FHA loan with a down payment as small as 3.5%.

VA Loans

VA loans are mortgage loans for veterans, active-duty members of the Armed Forces, and qualifying surviving spouses. The most popular benefit of VA loans for homebuyers is no down payment required. VA loans are insured by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

USDA Loans

Another type of government-backed loan, a USDA loan, helps people in rural and suburban areas buy homes. You can get a USDA loan with 0% down, but your home must be in an acceptable rural area, and you must meet income eligibility rules.

Bank Statement Loans

Bank statement loans are an option for self-employed individuals or small business owners who don’t have traditional income verification, like W-2sor tax returns, to qualify for a loan. Instead, lenders use the borrower’s bank statements, usually 12-24 months, to verify income. These loans tend to have higher interest rates and require a higher down payment compared to conventional loans.

If you have not already, set up saved searches online so that you will be notified as soon as new homes that meet your criteria come on the market. Your agent can also set up searches for you that update directly from the local MLS for homes to show you. It is always a good idea to make a list of your top priorities, some of which might depend on whether you are looking for a starter home or something else entirely.

Here are some things you might want to consider when shopping for a house:

- Price
- Square footage
- Home condition and possible need for repairs
- Access to public transportation
- Number of bedrooms
- Backyard/swimming pool
- Local entertainment options
- Local school district ranking
- Property value trends
- Property/real estate taxes

Rank your priorities from highest to lowest based on importance and show this list to your real estate agent. This will give your agent a better idea of specific homes that fit your criteria. You may need to spend some time searching for the perfect home, so do not get discouraged if your hunt takes longer than expected.

Only you can decide which property is right for you. Make sure you see plenty of homes before you decide which one you want to make an offer on. Like much of the homebuying process, you can do a great deal of your house hunting online, but seeing is believing! The home may look better or worse than the pictures.

2-3 months before buying:

- Get a pre-approval letter
- Select a real estate agent
- Save searches online
- Start scheduling showings (only a real estate agent can show you a house)

4. Buyer’s Agent Compensation

Real estate commission is not set by law and is fully negotiable. There are two ways an agent can be paid.

<u>How a buyer’s agent is paid if the seller offers compensation:</u>

1. The seller of the property you are interested in has offered to pay the commission due from you to me. In this case, your commission obligation to me will be paid by the seller out of funds you pay to purchase the home.

2. The seller has offered compensation consisting of only a portion of the commission you have agreed to pay me. This would require you to pay any portion of my commission not paid by the seller. Alternatively, you could condition your purchase offer on the seller paying all of your commission obligation to me.

<u>How a buyer’s agent is paid if the seller ***does not*** offer compensation:</u>

1. The seller has not offered to pay any portion of the commission you would owe to me. In this case, you can include a requirement that the seller pay your commission obligation as part of the offer you make on the property.
2. The seller will not agree to pay a buyer’s agent commission, in which case you would be responsible for my commission.

5. Make an offer

Once you find a home you love, make your offer! Keep in mind, it might not be accepted right away.

When you decide to make an offer on a home, you must submit an offer in writing. Your offer includes details about yourself (like your name and current address), the price you are willing to pay for the home, the initial deposit amount, the amount paid at closing and more. Your real estate agent will have a template ready to use and will submit this to the listing/seller's agent on your behalf. Your initial deposit is held in escrow by the attorney or title company and goes toward your down payment and closing costs if you buy the home. If you agree to the home sale and later cancel, you typically lose your deposit.

From here, the seller can respond in one of three ways:

Accept the offer: If the seller accepts the offer, you move into attorney review.

Reject the offer: If the seller rejects your offer, the ball is back in your court. You can choose to submit another offer or move onto another home.

Give you a counteroffer: The seller can also come back with a counteroffer of their own. They may change the purchase price or the terms of the sale. You can accept the counteroffer, reject it, or make another counteroffer.

Negotiations may go on for some time after you submit your offer. Let your real estate agent help you manage negotiations and do not be afraid to walk away if you cannot reach an agreement. Once you and the seller agree to an offer, it is time to move on to attorney review, which averages 3 days. Next come the appraisal and home inspection, which can include pool, septic, sewer inspections and tank sweeps.

1-2 months before buying:

- Find the right home
- Make an offer and negotiate, if necessary
- Sign the contract

6. Complete Closing-Related Tasks and Finalize Plans

During the 21 to 45-day closing period, your lender will set various checkpoints for their underwriters to approve your loan. This will likely include items like a home inspection, appraisal and requests for additional documentation. This process may take longer if you are getting an FHA or VA loan, which can require extra paperwork. If you have had a change to your credit or income since you were pre-approved, further verification may be required. The title company will begin a title search to verify the property's ownership history and issue title insurance to protect the buyer and lender from future claims. You may want to get a new survey of the property to ensure that you know the exact property lines.

Schedule the inspection

Lenders usually do not require a home inspection to get a loan, but you should still get an inspection before you buy a property. During a home inspection, an inspector will go through the home and look for potential problems. They will test electrical and plumbing systems, make sure the roofing is safe and in good shape, make sure appliances are working and much more. After the inspection, the inspector will give you a full report and a list of problems they found in the home (if any).

When you receive your inspection results, go over each item line by line and look for major issues. If a home has a serious health hazard (like lead paint or mold), ask the seller to correct the problem before you close. If you cannot reach an agreement, you may want to move on and consider other options. Read over your inspection results with your agent and ask whether they noticed any major red flags.

Bear in mind that you will be liable for any major repairs after your sale closes. A clogged toilet or a sink that does not drain are not major issues. However, if your home inspection reveals an expensive problem (like cracks in the foundation or poorly installed windows), you may want to reconsider the purchase. It is common for homebuyers to include a home inspection contingency in their purchase offer. A contingency gives buyers the option to back out of a purchase (or negotiate repairs) without losing their initial deposit if the home inspection reveals major issues with the home.

Get a home Appraisal

A home appraisal is a review that gives the current value of the property you want to buy. You must get an appraisal before you buy a home with a mortgage loan. Lenders require appraisals because they cannot lend out more money than a home is worth. If the appraised value comes back lower than your offer, you might have trouble getting financing. You have the option to pay the difference between the offer and appraisal, known as the gap. Depending upon the amount of your down payment, the lender may waive the gap. Be thoughtful about your offer and consider contesting the results of the appraisal if you believe the appraisal value is too low.

If it is a buyer's market, where sellers outnumber buyers, you can include an appraisal contingency in your offer. Appraisal contingencies are often drawn up to allow buyers to back out of a purchase (or negotiate a lower price), without losing their initial deposit, if the home appraises for less than the offer amount. As with inspection contingencies, appraisal contingencies may vary, so make sure you understand the nature of your agreement.

Ask For Repairs or Credits

After you view your inspection results, you might want to ask your seller to correct some of the problems you found. Typically, in a seller's market, these are limited to safety, environmental and mechanical issues. You can do this in one of three ways:

- Ask for a discounted purchase price considering the results.
- Request that the seller give you credits to cover some of your closing costs.
- Ask that the seller have the problems fixed before you close.

Your real estate agent will submit your requests to the listing/seller's attorney. The seller might accept your request, or they might reject it. If the seller rejects your request, it is up to you to decide how to proceed. If you have an inspection contingency in your offer letter, you can walk away from the sale and keep your initial deposit.

Start preparing for the move

Now is also the time to contact a local moving company to get your move scheduled. You should file your change of address request with the post office and do some research on how you will set up utilities at your new home.

If you are currently renting, you should give your landlord notice according to the terms of your lease.

Keep in contact with your team

Maintain communication with your lender as the details of your loan are finalized. Be prompt about submitting any documentation that is requested. You will also need to let your lender know your preferred home insurance provider. As you work to finalize your loan, your real estate agent and attorney should be kept in the loop.

Under a month

- Find a home inspector and have inspection completed
- Have the septic or sewer inspected, tank sweep, pest inspection
- Decide if a new survey is needed
- Shop for homeowners' insurance

7. Close On Your New Home

The morning or day of closing, you will do a final walkthrough to visually inspect the condition of the home. This is especially important if you requested repairs after your home inspection. This time allows you to check and make sure that the seller has made the repairs you requested. Now is not the time to ask for additional repairs.

Walk through the home and make sure the seller has not left any belongings. It should be broom swept and cleared out. You may also want to double-check your home systems one final time to make sure everything is working. If everything looks good, it is time for you to confidently move toward closing. Next, you will head to the attorney or title company's office to sign your closing paperwork. This typically takes less than 30 minutes.

Closing week

- Schedule final walk-through
- Sign paperwork
- Get your keys
- Change the locks on your new home and the garage opener code.