



Real Estate

YOUR HOME | YOUR LIFE

Most Popular ZIP Codes

Are you in the 32801, 89138 or the 70124? These ZIP codes fall in Orlando, Las Vegas and New Orleans, and they made the list of the most searched neighborhoods on the National Association of Realtors' website in 2014.

The fact that these cities — and many of the others on the association's list — are in warm weather climates is one of the main contributing factors driving their popularity. Other major dynamics influencing the influx of buyers in these areas may include a mix of historic, scenic and waterfront opportunities not available in other parts of the country.

And buyers in these hotspots are not settling for modestly priced homes. These searches in 2014 were for homes with a median list price of \$400,000, according to the National Association of Realtors. This is nearly double the national median home price of \$214,000.

ORLANDO

While the National Association of Realtors reports that only 28 percent of downtown Orlando residents own their home, the market is on fire in central Florida. The draw of warmer climates and walking distance to many waterfront activities is what transforms many out-of-staters into Floridians.

Walt Disney World is perhaps the most well-known destination in Orlando, and a youthful exuberance can be found throughout the city's

realty market, as well. The median age of Orlando residents is lower than that of the state of Florida — 37 compared to 40, according to the National Association of Realtors.

LAS VEGAS

Homebuyers in Las Vegas are not living next to fancy hotels or 24-7 casinos, but they are close enough to take part in the perpetual party atmosphere that has grown to define the city.

Las Vegas also has gained a reputation for being one of the hardest hit by the housing bubble. It has since recovered due to an assortment of factors including high-paying jobs, favorable climate and nationally recognized conservation areas.

NEW ORLEANS

In New Orleans, the average sale price for a house is in the \$200,000 range, reports the National Association of Realtors.

History and the water are major attractions to homebuyers in the Big Easy. There are many smaller communities directly outside of New Orleans that offer that big-city accessibility without the continuous action and bustle of the French Quarter.



Mortgages: Shop Around

Especially if you are a first-time homebuyer, knowing where to start looking for a qualified, reputable mortgage lender can be a challenge.

Home loans are available from several types of lenders, including commercial banks, mortgage companies and credit unions. Different lenders may quote you different prices, so be sure to contact several potential lenders to make sure you're getting a fair shake.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

When compiling total costs for a home loan, don't forget the fees associate with a loan, including loan origination, underwriting, broker, transaction, settlement and closing costs. These can add up in a hurry, so be ready to add them to your total budgeted amount.

What many lenders won't tell you is that many of these fees are negotiable. Some fees are paid when you apply for a loan, and others are paid at closing. If you can't barter your way down to a lower rate on some of the charges, you may be able to add them to your overall mortgage cost. Be mindful, though, that doing so will increase your loan amount and the total interest you end up paying in the long run.

SHOP FOR THE RIGHT RATES

The U. S. Department of

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recommends the following tips when trying to track down a mortgage interest rate that's right for you:

- Ask each lender and broker for a list of its current mortgage interest rates and whether the rates being quoted are the lowest for that day or week;
- Ask whether the rate is fixed or adjustable, and keep in mind that your monthly payment on an adjustable-rate loan will rise with interest rates; and
- If the rate quoted is for an adjustable-rate loan, ask how your rate and loan payment will vary.

CONSIDER A BROKER

You also can get a home loan through a mortgage broker, who coordinates transactions instead of actually lending you money directly. A broker has access to several lenders and can help you find the best loan terms.

Brokers generally will contact several lenders regarding your application and can help optimize your deal if you have contracted them to do so. Just like shopping around for a mortgage, be sure to ask a few different brokers how much they charge for their services.



Don't Get Burned

Owning your home mortgage free can be a liberating experience, both mentally and financially. And it's happening more often than you may think.

The National Association of Realtors estimates that roughly 30 percent of U.S. homebuyers are now making their purchases 100 percent in cash, compared with only 15 percent in 2008.

Even if you're in great financial shape, it is still wise to consult with a finance professional to evaluate the potential transaction. There are many aspects to consider, including tax impacts that you may overlook.

KNOW YOUR SITUATION

Besides the obvious savings of not having to pay interest on a mortgage, you also can save money on closing costs and may even win a better negotiation if a seller knows you're buying in cash.

It is still smart to assess your personal circumstances before buying a house with cash. The National Association of Realtors recommends that you consider the following questions before spending a major portion of your cash reserves:

- Will you still have plenty of funds set aside for retirement?
- Will you still have at least six months of emergency funds in a savings account?
- Do you possess sufficient health, life and disability insurance?

SET SOME GOALS

Having a clear financial goal for the future of your family can help you decide if buying a house is worth the depletion of a large amount of your savings.

In most cases, owning a home free and clear is the ideal situation, considering how much money you will save on interest and closing costs. You also can count on being able to rapidly accrue savings without a mortgage payment, depending on your income level.

In the case of an illness in your immediate family, you will have more of your monthly income available to pay for medical bills or related charges because none of your earnings will be going toward a mortgage payment.



Being a Landlord

Being a landlord can be a profitable experience if you enter the role prepared. The rental segment of the real estate industry was one of the few that actually benefited from the Great Recession.

Many people who were foreclosed upon were unable to secure new loans.

While the market continues to recover, landlords are still seeing rapid fill rates when it comes to finding tenants for their properties. Many landlords are buying up new properties due to low interest rates and ample inventories of affordable homes.

If you're looking to become an investor in the real estate market by becoming a landlord, there are some things to consider. While low mortgage rates and high renter demand can mean great financial returns on your investment, being a landlord isn't solely comprised of sitting back and collecting a monthly check.

MAINTENANCE

Do you have a knack for making simple repairs around the home? If you answered yes, becoming a landlord may be right up your alley. If you answered no, be sure to devote a budget to paying people who are skilled in performing such tasks.

When you rent out a home, things will break. Plumbing will leak, and appliances will stop working. It's the nature of homeownership.

If you're depending on every cent of rent to pay your own bills, you may not be fully prepared to become a landlord, as you can count on at least a portion of your revenue to be reinvested back into the home to keep it functional and up to code.

THE TRUST FACTOR

Handing over the keys of your home to a perfect stranger can be a scary proposition. After all, you're the one who has put in the hard work to make the home renter-ready. What if your new tenant doesn't value or appreciate the sweat equity that went into your efforts?

You can protect yourself from bad renters by requiring a credit score or a list of past landlord references. Doing so will help paint a better picture of the candidates vying to fill your property, as well as give you peace of mind when agreeing to become their landlord.



Sell Your House Quickly

The peak home buying season is in the spring, but you may not be in a position to list your property during that time.

Just because you miss this window doesn't mean your home can't still sell quickly. It all comes down to strategy — and whether you're willing to compromise on your ideal price to make the sale happen.

PRICE IT RIGHT

We all want a return on our investment, but don't get attached to the idea of making back every penny you've put into your home during your ownership period. There are likely improvements that won't necessarily pay for themselves, such as certain cosmetic renovations you may have performed without considering their value to the next owner.

One of the first steps you should take is sitting down with your Realtor to discuss a comparable analysis of other homes in your area. Get an understanding of the selling price for homes that are comparable to your home's size, location and number of bedrooms.

If your home has been on the market for longer than a month or two without any real offers, this could be your first clue that your price is too high. Work with your Realtor to choose a new price that is more in line with the market.



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CURB APPEAL

Curb appeal is defined as what a person can see of your home from the street. It's amazing how much of an impact a fresh coat of paint or a well-landscaped lawn can make on a prospective buyer.

To make sure you're setting the right first impression, it is important to consider some basic factors, starting with landscaping. Is your yard well manicured? Are your flower beds maintained and full of live, blooming flowers? The

key to getting a buyer in the front door is catching their attention with your yard and landscaping.

Also consider your trees. Are they planted a safe distance away from the home, as to not pose a threat for fire

or roof damage in the case of a storm? Are there weak or old branches hanging loosely from the tree? Take care of these issues before putting your home on the market if you want to quickly sell your home.

Homelessness Assistance

The real estate industry is often synonymous with development, investment and renovation.

But what about those who are homeless? Where do they fit in to the discussion? The federal government has many programs in place designed to help homeless people, including youth, veterans and the chronically homeless.

These programs can help people find rental, homebuyer and homeowner assistance, opening the door to opportunities they may not find elsewhere.

HOMELESSNESS: BY THE NUMBERS

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports that in January 2014, there were more than 578,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States. Of that number, more than 216,000 were people in families.

About 15 percent of the homeless population are considered chronically homeless individuals, meaning they have experienced homelessness for a year or longer, HUD states, while about 9 percent of homeless people — 49,933 — are veterans.

HUD PROGRAMMING

HUD oversees home mort-



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gage lending practices and also operates the Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs (SNAPS).

The office supports the nationwide commitment to ending homelessness by offering funding opportunities to nonprofit organizations to rehouse homeless individuals and families. SNAPS also advocates

self-sufficiency and promotes the effective utilization of mainstream resources available to individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

THE PROGRAMS

More than 1 million people are served in HUD-supported emergency, transitional and

permanent housing programs each year. The total number of people who experience homelessness may be twice as high.

There are four federally defined categories under which individuals and families may qualify as homeless, as defined by HUD:

- Literally homeless;
- Imminent risk of home-

lessness;

- Homeless under other federal statutes; and
- Fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence.

For more information on HUD's programming or how you can become involved in helping someone you love find help, click on the "Homeless Assistance" tab at www.hud.gov.

Become a Home Inspector

While the housing market continues to climb, there are many opportunities for aspiring professionals. One such career is that of a home inspector.

A home inspector makes an average annual salary of \$53,450, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It is possible to make much more than the average depending on where you live in the country and whether the housing market has fully recovered where you reside.

The more homes being put on the market and sold in your area, the better your chances for success as a home inspector.

RESPONSIBILITIES

A home inspector is generally contracted by a homeowner or potential buyer to perform a comprehensive inspection of a home.

Home inspectors spend the majority of their workdays on site, either alone or as part of a team. Some home inspections require some light physical labor, including crawling into tight spaces or regularly climbing ladders.

HOW CAN I GET STARTED?

One of the first steps you should take is looking into your local community college or trade school to find out if inspection training programs are available in your area. These types of institutions will be able to give you the



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basics of what the job will entail, as well as the next steps you should take.

Some of the steps will include joining the local chapter of a recognized home inspector association. These organizations provide regular educational meetings and will keep you up to date on any changes to local or national

building codes.

PROS AND CONS

One of the major factors you should consider before pursuing a home inspector training is liability. When you inspect a home, you are basically informing potential homeowners of conditions that could

affect the safety of occupants and the costs of ownership.

If you happen to miss any potentially dangerous home defects, you may be contacted by the new owners. They may even be able to force you or your company to pay for the undisclosed problems after the close of escrow. These problems can range from minor in

nature and rather inexpensive to fix to major issues, such as shoddy heating and air units or major electrical problems that could put a dent into your business. Not only could you be liable for paying for the damage, but your reputation may be compromised in your local community once word gets around.