

January fine time to sell home

No need to take house off the market right now

By **Michele Chan Santos**

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN
Dec. 31, 2011

<http://www.statesman.com/business/january-fine-time-to-sell-home-2071004.html>

Traditionally, the winter months are thought of as a slow time in real estate. The weather is colder and wetter and people are coping with holiday bills. For home sellers who are frustrated after several months of listing their home on the market, it's tempting to give up.

But marketing your house during the off-season is not only possible, it is often successful.

Several area real estate agents we spoke to all had busier-than-usual Decembers, with many listings, showings, contracts and closings. They offered advice on how to market your home during the winter months of January and February, as well as how to refresh a listing that hasn't moved.

For this story, we spoke with Leisa Ormsbee of J.B. Goodwin Realtors in Round Rock, Molly Austin of Blackburn Properties in Austin, Peter Stiles of Green Mango Real Estate and Carrie Bills, the owner and broker of Green Mango Real Estate in Austin.

Help for the home still lingering on the market

Take a look at the price. It's possible you're asking for an unrealistic amount for your house. "Every property is different, but if it's not selling, it could be priced too high," Ormsbee said. "They need to look at and understand the market in their specific neighborhood. It is very important to educate and help clients understand what the market in their specific neighborhood will bear, even if the price is not what they are hoping for."

It doesn't matter if you spent \$50,000 on a swimming pool, for example, if the people shopping in your neighborhood don't necessarily want a pool. You can't always expect to recoup all the money you spent on a home, the agents said.

Especially in the current economy, "price is a huge factor," Stiles said. "Buyers want to feel value. That's really essential. Look at the competition in your neighborhood. Make sure your house has the best overall value."

If it's priced correctly, then something else about the house or property might be turning buyers off.

Make sure your house is spotless, organized, uncluttered and appealing.

"You have to think of your house as a retail merchandise piece," Austin said. "When people are walking into your home, you need to treat it as if they are walking into a retail space."

Online marketing campaign is essential

Another key to getting buyers to your door is a strong online presence, Austin said. "In today's market, 95 percent of people are looking online first," Austin said. "If your online presence is not good, that could be why you haven't had an offer. Presentation is 90 percent of the game in getting people to come to the door."

Quality photos, a website devoted to the house and staging your house for both the photo session and showings can help you draw in potential buyers, the agents said. Many professional photography companies in town specialize in real estate photos.

Simply putting your furniture in a more visually appealing arrangement often makes a big impact, too. "Hiring stagers to rearrange your furniture can be very affordable, \$125 or \$150," Ormsbee said. "I always talk to my clients about staging."

Remember to update your Multiple Listing Service listing whenever you make improvements to the house, Bills said.

"Whenever there is a price or status change on the property made in the MLS system, thousands of real estate agents receive notification," Bills said. "For example, if the seller decides to update a kitchen or bath in order to expedite the sale, and if that affects the price, then that needs to be immediately changed in MLS."

Show that your house is well-maintained

Another key to selling your house this winter is making it look very well-cared for. "Pressure wash the house and driveway. Clean off the air vents. Polish the doors and wash the windows," Stiles said.

He often takes his sellers to see the other houses for sale in their neighborhood in person, so they can size up the competition. "We focus on 'what do we have to do to be the next home that sells here,'" Stiles said.

Austin recommends having a repair person service the heating and air-conditioning systems, and having a roofer inspect the roof. With a good report, you can demonstrate to potential buyers that the roof is in good shape, and recent HVAC service indicates that you maintain the home well.

The buyers are there

Despite the popular thought that most people don't look for homes in winter, buyers are out and looking, Stiles said.

"People are frustrated by the inventory of available homes right now," Stiles said. "The inventory has been hit-and-miss. Sellers who can afford to, are waiting to sell until prices go up. That's leaving a gap in quality."

Stiles' last three listings have gone under contract rapidly, with multiple offers. He's sold many homes in Central and South Austin. "Good stuff gets snatched up quickly," he said. "Some people have been looking for a long time and haven't found anything that grabbed them."

Austin has had four closings in December, for properties in West and Southwest Austin.

"You can sell houses in the winter months. If it's the time you need to sell, you can make it work," Austin said.

Ormsbee currently has 12 listings, mostly in Williamson County and was the Williamson County Association of Realtors' Realtor of the Year in 2010.

"Quite honestly, Realtors all have the same tools," Ormsbee said. "It's what we do with those tools that makes a difference. Your Realtor should hold open houses, do mail-outs, be constantly marketing, and watching the neighborhood comparables closely."

"It's a great time to put your house on the market," Ormsbee continued. "People have this mind-set to put their house on the market in the spring, but we only have 525 units on the market in Round Rock when normally it's closer to 1,100 or 1,200. I've closed on homes in December and January multiple times."

Properties to consider

For home buyers, January and February can be a great time to purchase. "Right now there are three factors making it a great time to buy: the interest rates are really low, the inventory is low and the prices are low," Ormsbee said.

She is listing a house at 2013 St. Andrews Drive, Round Rock, 78664, for \$250,000. This home is in the Forest Creek neighborhood and is shaded by tall oak trees. It has four bedrooms, three bathrooms and 3,012 square feet. It has hardwood floors, is on a large corner lot and is two stories. Forest Creek is a neighborhood built around the Forest Creek Golf Course and is in the Round Rock school district.

Austin is listing a house at 4411 Knob Oak Lane, Austin, 78735, for \$350,000. It just went on the market at the end of November. This home is in the Travis Country neighborhood in Southwest Austin and has a large backyard, covered porch and many mature trees. It is two stories and has four bedrooms, 2 1/2 bathrooms and 2,146 square feet. Travis Country has two swimming pools, two private parks, two basketball courts, several tennis courts and miles of hike-and-bike trails for the use of its residents.

Bills is listing a house at 1020 Harwood Place, Austin, 78704, for \$439,500. This terraced home, built in 1949, is surrounded by oak trees, rock patios and garden beds. It has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and 1,885 square feet. It's located in Travis Heights, a neighborhood near downtown Austin featuring many historical homes, from bungalows to larger estates. Travis Heights is adjacent to South Congress Avenue and is walking distance to the many shops and restaurants there.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin