

Tampa Market

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CHARACTER, CHARM AND LOCATION SELL

Though home prices are lower than last year's prices, there are pockets of hope and opportunity in the housing market.

In Tampa real estate agent Ed Gunning's world, things aren't as glum as one might expect.

Those pricey bayfront mansions? Still getting plenty of buyer traffic. Selling that Palma Ceia bungalow? No problem.

"Homes with charm and character - the hardwood floors, the fireplace, the canopy trees - people still want these," said Gunning, a Smith & Associates agent who primarily deals with South Tampa real estate. "I just showed a house that got three offers in less than a week."

From what he's experienced, Gunning believes that the housing market is picking up all over the Tampa Bay area.

A quarterly property values report suggests otherwise.

In the first four months of this year, the average sales price of existing homes in Hillsborough County dropped 9 percent, according to reports by the Greater Tampa Association of Realtors.

South Tampa, however, is bucking the trend - or at least it did last quarter. The average sales prices south of Kennedy Boulevard either rose or stayed the same as the first quarter last year.

The median price near the West Shore area rose 14.2 percent to \$365,000. In the eastern part of South Tampa, near Palma Ceia, the median stayed the same at \$458,750. Prices south of Gandy rose 6.9 percent to \$224,500. Values dropped almost everywhere else in the county, and especially among new homes.

While sale prices in parts of South Tampa are higher than they were a year ago, they are cheaper than they might have been during the housing boom.

For those who haven't been able to sell their homes, South Tampa real estate agent Lance Williams said the trick is convincing sellers to forget about what their house was worth in 2005.

"If you take a house that you bought in 2000, you can add 5 to 10 percent, just as you would if you were following a normal increase," he said.

"It's amazing what you can do when you come down to a realistic price. There are still people out there looking to buy these houses."

Reducing the price often results in quicker sales, Gunning said. He recently watched one seller in the West Shore area sell his \$735,000 home in just a few days. But that was after he dropped the price from \$900,000.

Statewide, sales have risen in communities where prices have plunged.

Last month, the Florida Association of Realtors reported that prices in Fort Myers were 29 percent lower than a year earlier, while sales were 41 percent higher.

In Fort Pierce, where prices had dropped 34 percent in a year, sales had risen 34 percent.

But experts predict that a true, substantial recovery in the housing market won't happen until next year.

And South Tampa has not been completely immune to the economic and property values plunge in the past few years.

Still, it's one of the hottest spots to buy or sell, allowing it to fare better through the tough times, Gunning said.

"We can't rebuild Hyde Park," he said. "We can't duplicate New Suburb Beautiful. People who want homes in these neighborhoods are still sitting on the sidelines, waiting for that market to open up."

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