

Bidding wars have broken out over Mid-Hudson homes

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Coronavirus-related challenges to show and close on residential listings sent sales totals for single-family homes tumbling between 2% and 15%, depending on the county, according to newly revised data.

But local real estate professionals said the city residents seeking less densely populated areas and record-low mortgage rates have driven up sales of late, especially since mid-June, when state officials relaxed restrictions on rules for showing homes.

Particularly since late spring, bidding wars have been breaking out on even small, simple, nondescript homes in some of the least popular, most far-flung municipalities in Orange, Sullivan, Ulster and Dutchess counties, local Realtors said.

“Come prepared to pull the trigger as quickly as possible,” Ian Blumenthal, a licensed real estate agent with Catskill Sales Associates is telling Sulli-

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van County buyers.

Those who might look at Long Island or the Lower Hudson Valley are aggressively snapping up homes in the Mid-Hudson and the Catskills “because they can have the same amount of home and half the taxes,” Blumenthal said.

The market is so hot that local buyers often can’t compete with non-local buyers’ offers, local Realtors said, though that’s not readily apparent in the latest housing data, which tell a tale of two markets.

Dwindling sales totals make it look like the local market slumped in the first half of the year. Other evidence, from the anecdotal to statistics indicating shrinking inventories and rising prices, show robust demand in recent weeks.

Orange County’s single-family home sales tally tumbled 15.4% through June 30 to 1,365 compared to 1,614 last year, according to newly revised midyear data, released Monday, by the Hudson Gateway Association of Realtors. But the county’s median sales price rose 9.6% to

\$285,000. Elsewhere, sales of single-family homes in Sullivan County slipped 2.4% to 405 through midyear from 415 in mid-2019, but the median sales price shot up 18.6% to \$166,000.

And single-family-home sales sank by 6.7 percent to 647 in Ulster County, according to the Ulster County Board of Realtors, and by 24.4 percent to 152 in Dutchess County, based on the Mid-Hudson Multiple Listing Service’s figures.

But strong demand sent Ulster County’s median home price soaring 33% to \$308,569, while helping Dutchess County’s median price hold steady at \$325,000.

‘A feeding frenzy’

Understanding the state of local real estate sales starts with separating them from the statewide market.

Across New York, through June 30, the pandemic sent single-family home sales cratering 34% to 8,107, compared with a year ago, according to the New York State Association of Realtors.

But rising home prices and shrinking inventories in the Mid-Hudson and Catskills markets appear to show them occupying a real estate sweet spot.

North of Rockland County, homes have the right space, lot size, affordability and proximity to the city to be attractive – especially as employers permanently revise expectations for how much employees can work remotely, local real estate professionals said.

Prospective buyers, they added, are tired of fewer activities and more barren streets in and around the city, during the pandemic, and they’re eyeing more space because their children might spend less time in school buildings come fall.

“We are in the midst of a feeding frenzy,” said Santo Tambone, executive officer for the Mid-Hudson MLS. In Dutchess County, “Within one or two days, a home has multiple offers. We’re receiving purchases that are sight unseen, with people coming in with 40 percent down and the appraisal being inconsequential because little is being mortgaged out.”



For those who do need loans, interest rates have fallen to eye-popping historic lows, according to the mortgage finance giant Freddie Mac.

In mid-July, the average rate on a 30-year fixed mortgage dropped to 2.9% – the lowest in nearly 50 years of record keeping – down from 3.72 percent at 2020's start and 3.81% a year ago.

'What am I waiting for?'

"Between people realizing they're not going to have to commute into Manhattan anymore, the pandemic and the crazy-low interest rates, anyone who was thinking of buying, (is saying) 'What am I waiting for?'" said Donna Gennaro, an associate broker with Better Homes and Gardens Rand Realty.

"It's the perfect storm," added Gennaro, who said that just her firm's Central Valley office racked up a whopping \$1 million in gross commissions for June alone.

Single-family homes averaged roughly the same number of days on the market – give or take one to three days – midway through 2020 versus last year in Orange (104 days), Sullivan (161) and Ulster (109) counties. (Dutchess County's average DOM, however, rose to 94 days from 82.)

But inventories shriveled.

In Sullivan County, the number of unsold, listed homes stood at 670 at June's end, compared with 997 last year and 1,204 as recently as 2017, according to [HGAR](#).

Orange County's inventory fell to 1,501 homes from 1,834 in 2019 and a recent high of 2,375 in 2016. Buyers cleaved Ulster County's total nearly in half to 318 unsold, listed homes from 668 last year and 822 just three years ago, while demand drove down Dutchess County's tally to 889 this year from 1,266 last year.

Mid-Hudson real estate professionals started "hearing the first hints of desperation (from buyers) on phone in the third or fourth week of March," said Harris Safier, an associate broker with Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Hudson Valley Properties.

How long will the local bull market

last? Perhaps "through the beginning of the fall at this intensity," Safier speculated. "I'm telling the people on my team, 'Save up your nuts because this isn't going to go on forever.'"



Associate broker Donna Gennaro, left, said that just her firm's Central Valley office racked up a whopping \$1 million in gross commissions for June alone. Thomas Mignone, right, recently toured a home in Campbell Hall.

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