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Sunday



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Real estate scene still unsettled

By TOM HOWELL JR.
thowell@njherald.com

Years after the long housing boom popped with a loud bang at mid-decade — sending home prices plummeting and dominating the headlines — Sussex County is still a buyer's market and a mysterious roller coaster for borrowers and sellers.

Short-term statistics suggest an uptick in median home prices in recent weeks, but the housing market is still a complicated, if not dismal, picture in various respects.

Foreclosure filings are still pouring in around Sussex County and New Jersey. The total numbers have been steadily high compared to the halcyon days of about five years ago, although the situation is not as bad as in states such as California, Nevada or Florida, which became the poster children of the housing downturn.

And short sales, in which a lender accepts less than the



Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald

A For Sale sign and one advertising a bank auction are seen in front of a home on Spring Street in Newton.

balance owed on the property's loan, are increasingly common, according to Realtors in Sussex County.

Home prices, of course, are still lower than they were at their peak before the financial crisis. The median sales price for existing single-family homes in Sussex County

dropped by \$9,000 from the second quarter in 2009 to the second quarter of 2010, according to the National Association of Realtors.

But the picture has been a bit rosier over the last three months, with prices in Sussex County increasing slightly and homes spending

fewer days on the market.

The median sale price of a Sussex County home was \$242,500 in the last 90 days, compared to \$239,900 in the 90 days preceding that period, according to the Garden State Multiple Listing Service.

"Prices are still low enough where it is a buyer's market," said Jenny Deuel, a Realtor with Century 21 Gross & Jansen in Andover Township. "People are getting fantastic deals out there."

The median listing period was 235 days, compared to 280 in the prior 90-day period.

"With things on the rise a little more, it's making sellers happy and it's making buyers happy," Deuel said. "It gives them the sense that eventually they'll have some really nice equity in their house."

The ability to buy some acreage in pastoral Sussex County, instead of a postage stamp in Morris County,

seems to be returning, said John Chambers, of ReMax Platinum Group and president of the Sussex County Association of Realtors.

"The opportunity to live in this beautiful community is largely more affordable," he said.

It's been a tumultuous few years for all aspects of the economy, but rising foreclosure rates and those notorious subprime mortgages — wrapped into a tangled web of traded securities — were the first to make headlines as the nation sank into a recession.

Today, "lenders are definitely still lending — that's never been the issue," said Rachel Muller, assistant vice president mortgage originator for First Hope Bank, in Hope. "But the debt ratio has gotten stricter, ensuring that people can afford what they buy."

Short sales are becoming more common as the

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Idling engines raise her ire

By PHILLIP MOLNAR
pmolnar@njherald.com

SANDYSTON — As Elizabeth Vernon, 30, filled up her glass bottles with clear water from a pipe pumping from an underground well in Stokes State Forest last week, she could not help but get annoyed.

A large white utility truck had pulled up almost as soon as she started filling the bottles. The driver, a state Division of Parks and Forestry employee, got out of the vehicle, walked around, got something out of another car, and then walked around some more. The truck was left running for about five minutes.

Vernon's disgust was palpable.

See, Vernon doesn't much care for idling. She gets especially frustrated when her 5-month old daughter is in the car — as she was that day — breathing in the exhaust fumes.

As it turns out, New Jersey state law doesn't like idling either.

Starting in the 1980s, it became a crime in the Garden State to idle a vehicle for more than three minutes. Although the law does not apply to emergency vehicles, cars stopped in traffic, snowplows and vehicles being repaired, the fines for average drivers are steep.

The first violation for idling is \$250, the second violation is \$500, and the third and each subsequent violation is \$1,000.

The law was originally intended for diesel-powered vehicles but was later expanded to gasoline-fueled vehicles.

"Awareness of it, historically, is very low," Amy Hillman, the state Department of Environmental Protection's



Photos by Anna Murphey/New Jersey Herald

Elizabeth Vernon, of Andover Borough, holds one of the No Idling Zone signs given to her by the state Department of Environmental Protection.

senior environmental specialist, said of the no-idling law.

Hillman said the DEP has sold more than 8,000 "No Idling" signs to municipalities all over the state, but she conceded that the law is not a "flashy" one that gets the attention of New Jerseyans.

Regardless, idling affects lungs just the same. According to a 2009 report from the nonprofit advocacy group Environmental Defense Fund, the pollutants from idling vehicles have been linked to asthma, heart disease, chronic bronchitis and cancer.

The report cited research

See IDLE, Page A2



Drivers line up and leave their cars idling while they wait for their turn at the spring water tap in Stokes State Forest. Vernon feels that the current No Idling sign is not in the best place, as it is too far from the spring. She also would like to see more towns get on the bandwagon and support the No Idling law already on the books.

Newton Theater shuts its doors

By TOM HOWELL JR.
thowell@njherald.com

NEWTON — The historic Newton Theater, which battled dwindling attendance in the age of the modern cinema and closed for a spell about three years ago, has gone dark.

And this time, a sequel isn't in the making.

The owners of the theater, Planned Investment Equities of Flemington, had informed town officials that it would close the theater by the end of last week for financial reasons.

By Friday, passersby saw large black letters that said, "Theatre closed," above the doors.

"The location wasn't doing well and they thought it was time to shut down," Town Manager Tom Russo said.

This closure seems to be for good, with the owners

looking at different types of businesses after tabling talk of upgrades to the theater, according to Russo.

"When one door closes, another door opens. It's an opportunity for someone to come in and put something in one of the best spots in town," Russo said, adding, "We're sad to see the theater go, because it's such a landmark."

Built in 1923 on the corner of Spring and Madison streets, the theater became an iconic structure in town with its classic marquee and, even in recent years, entertainment from the in-house price organ. Recent ticket prices, at \$7 a pop, were also a relative throwback.

"I think it stinks," town resident Torry Forbush said Saturday. "I love that theater. It's adorable. I'd much rather go here, about five minutes



Photo by Amy Paterson/New Jersey Herald

A "closed" sign greets visitors to the Newton Theater on Saturday.

from my house, to see a movie than to Rockaway or Succasunna."

The theater went through similar tumult from late 2007 to early 2008, when New Day Cinemas shut it down and handed it over to lessor Nelson Page, who had run

the theater for 10 years through 2006. Page and the owners in Flemington could not be reached for comment on Saturday.

The theater is one of the first things motorists see coming into town on Spring Street from points east. Its

owners have bandied about the idea of putting a bank there, because of its dimensions and capacity for a drive-through, according to Russo.

However, he said the firm has been reaching out to a few different companies.