

DeSoto County Economic Development Council – January 2008

Buying a Home Remains a Good Deal

**By Vicky Reel, President
Northwest Mississippi Association of REALTORS®**

During the recent National Association of REALTORS® Conference and Expo in Las Vegas, NAR released a survey that reveals an overwhelming majority of consumers believe buying a home is a deal they can take to the bank.

Nine out of 10 consumers say buying a home in today's housing market remains a good deal. The real estate association's National Housing Pulse Survey also revealed 59 percent of those surveyed said right now is a good time to buy a home.

But consumer optimism about the housing market doesn't come without some concerns. When asked how easy it is to obtain an affordable mortgage, almost 6 in 10 consumers said getting a mortgage approved is not an easy task. And more than 8 in 10 consumers said finding enough money for a down payment and closing costs are also obstacles to buying a home.

The recent pullback from the financial markets by some investors may have led to a perception among home buyers that financing has gone away. What is going away is the subprime lending market, and that is a good thing for a typical homebuyer.

Financing is just as strong and accessible as ever. Lenders are offering a variety of mortgage programs and are eager to work with qualified buyers.

There are no lenders saying they don't have money to lend, and interest rates are at 40-year lows.

In DeSoto County, there is a healthy inventory of pre-owned and new housing and a wide selection of styles. They are offered at one of the best values per square foot and at one of the lowest property tax rates in the country.

But it isn't all dollars and cents when buying a house. While the average sale price in DeSoto County is an attractive \$172,000, there is also a quality-of-life issue that new residents cite when asked why they chose the area.

Educational opportunities provided by public and private schools are more often than not the primary factor in the decision-making process among families with children. With 34 schools and more than 28,000 students, the DeSoto County school system is the second largest and the fastest growing school district in Mississippi. The district has one of the highest accreditation ratings awarded by the State Department of Education; all schools are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools; and student test scores surpassed state averages in the 2007 school year.

A \$115 million bond issue approved in 2005 led to the construction of 9 new schools and the renovation of 11 existing schools.

Northwest Community College and the University of Mississippi-DeSoto Center offer degree programs in education, business and liberal arts and graduate programs in education and business. Northwest recently completed a \$7.5 million expansion to accommodate an enrollment that is growing by 5 percent annually.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the 65 to 74-year-old population is projected for the largest percentage increase between now and 2011 – a growth of almost 45 percent. That is partly attributable to retirement of the Baby Boom generation, but DeSoto County is positioned to accommodate that growth. Expansion of Baptist Memorial Hospital-DeSoto, the second largest hospital in the expansive Baptist Health System; an influx of private physician practices and health care specialists into the county; and a favorable homestead exemption program that freezes property taxes for those 65 and older are highly attractive incentives to this population.

The security of a suburban, family environment with easy access to the amenities of a major metropolitan area; infrastructure that facilitates economic and social interaction; a forward-looking planning process to accommodate growth; and government stability are cited by Jim Flanagan, president and CEO of the DeSoto County Economic Council, as other reasons for the increase of 37,500 residents over the past six years.

He notes that the county has benefited from excellent planning. The county was the first in the state to establish land use controls and is one of only a few counties in the state with a comprehensive planning approach to its future growth.

For all of these reasons and many others, DeSoto County continues to attract new families at a rate of 7 per day, a number based on the activation of utility services, and continues to be one of the fastest growing counties in the United States. MONEY magazine named Olive Branch among its 100 Best Places to Live earlier this year.

According to the most recent report from the Northwest Mississippi Association of REALTORS®, 272 houses sold in DeSoto County in September. While that is down from September 2006, it is still rewarding to know that almost 300 new families each month continue to choose DeSoto County as the place to live.

Contrary to what captures the headlines, the local economy is still the biggest factor home buyers consider when it comes to where they choose to live – not what they may be hearing about the national home-buying landscape.

With a strong job market, an attractive cost of living and a quality of life second to none, DeSoto County continues to be an appealing relocation option.

Pair those strengths with a housing inventory that meets the needs of the most discriminating of buyers, reputable lenders with available funds and a variety of mortgage programs, and it's clear why buyers continue to beat a path to the area.

This is a great time to become a homeowner in a great place to live.