MarketWatch
LOUDOUN COUNTY
VOLUME 8 | September 2017
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Champagne, Baths – and Real Estate

Bubbles are great to have in champagne, baths, and a host of other things, but they are not good for the real estate market.

A real estate bubble generally is caused by unjustified speculation in the housing market that leads to a rapid and unsustainable increase in prices. When it bursts, prices decline quickly – often to levels lower than when the run up in prices began. The whole country experienced a painful bursting bubble almost a decade ago, and its impact was felt far beyond the real estate market.

There is no doubt that home prices have risen significantly in the metro area during the past several years and affordability, especially for first-time homebuyers, is a real concern. But are we in a bubble? The short answer is no.

From 2002 through 2005, home prices in the Washington, DC metro area skyrocketed. Demand was artificially high, driven by ridiculously low "teaser" interest rate mortgages. Prices were up 14% in 2002, 15% in 2003, 20% in 2004, and 21% in 2005. Since mortgage underwriting guidelines were essentially non-existent, more and more buyers rushed into the market to buy homes they could not afford, with the expectation they could cash in their gains later.

When those artificially low adjustable rate mortgages started to adjust and guidelines tightened, demand plummeted. There was a 40% drop in the number of home sales in 2009, compared to the peak in 2005. At the same time, the market was flooded with new inventory as homeowners rushed to sell homes they could no longer afford. With the enormous drop in demand and the jump in homes on the market, prices dropped almost 15% in 2009. Prices only started to head back up in 2012.

None of those supply and demand conditions exist today.

Let's take a look at demand. There are three basic ways to increase the desire for housing: an upturn in economic activity, an increase in population, and generally low interest rates. To a large degree, all three of those exist today. The region's economy is doing pretty well, especially in The District. Further, the region has grown by 1,000,000 residents in the last 14 years. Finally, low mortgage interest rates have created an extremely attractive environment for prospective home purchasers, and yet, demand has not exploded. The number of home sales this year in the metro area will be virtually identical to the number that sold in 2003. There have been significant demographic shifts – people are waiting longer to marry and form households, and student loan debt makes it harder for many to buy their first home. And despite those low interest rates, it is harder to qualify for a loan. In short, demand is reasonable, and it not being fueled by speculation.

On the supply side, inventory of available homes is at a historic low. Just as buyers are waiting longer, homeowners are staying put longer. Nationally, the median number of years sellers have been in their homes has risen from six years in 2000 to 10 years today. New construction isn't keeping pace with household formation.

Low inventory has certainly contributed to increasing home prices, but even in the hottest market area in The District, annual appreciation rates have been between 6% and 8% during the last three years. It is far lower in the suburbs. If demand were greater, the lack of inventory would have pushed prices much higher.

Markets seek balance over time, as long as they are not artificially stimulated or restricted. The hottest areas in our region are due for an adjustment because 6%-8% appreciation isn't sustainable forever. In our more suburban markets, current appreciation rates are in line with historic norms. And we know that eventually, mortgage interest rates will climb, and that will ease some of the upper pressure on home prices. We believe the inevitable market adjustment will come in the form of lower appreciation rates, not a drop in prices.

ABSORPTION RATE BY PROPERTY TYPE

The following tables track absorption rate by property type, comparing the rates in the just-completed month to the rates in the same month of the previous year. The absorption rate is a measure of the health of the market, and tracks the percentage of homes that were on the market during the given month and in the given price range that went under contract. [The formula is # Contracts/ (# Contracts + # Available).] An example: The absorption rate for detached homes priced between $500,000 and $749,999 in July 2017 was 25.8%. That compares to a rate of 19.8% in July 2016, and the increase means the market was better in 2017 for that type of home. If the absorption rate was less in 2017 than in 2016, we have put the 2017 rate in **red**. This month there was **improvement for 10 of 14 individual price categories with activity**, and two remained the same.

Condo/Co-op	July 2016			July 2017		
Absorption Rates	Listings	Contracts	Rate	Listings	Contracts	Rate
$299,999 & under	96	76	44.2%	58	46	**44.2%**
$300,000 - $499,999	92	37	28.7%	68	43	**38.7%**
$500,000 - $749,999	15	3	16.7%	11	3	**21.4%**
$750,000 - $999,999	0	0	–	1	0	–
$1,000,000 - $1,499,999	0	0	–	0	0	–
$1,500,000 & higher	0	0	–	0	0	–
Grand Total:	**203**	**116**	**36.4%**	**138**	**92**	**40.0%**

ABSORPTION RATES – CONDOS AND CO-OPS

- The overall absorption rate for condos and co-ops for July 2017 was **40.0%**, up from 36.4% in July 2016.
- Safe to say the market for condos priced more than $500,000 is limited to virtually non-existent.

Fee Simple Attached	July 2016			July 2017		
Absorption Rates	Listings	Contracts	Rate	Listings	Contracts	Rate
$299,999 & under	16	30	65.2%	8	18	**69.2%**
$300,000 - $499,999	238	183	43.5%	177	156	**46.8%**
$500,000 - $749,999	91	23	20.2%	98	30	**23.4%**
$750,000 - $999,999	12	1	7.7%	9	1	**10.0%**
$1,000,000 - $1,499,999	3	0	0.0%	4	0	**0.0%**
$1,500,000 & higher	0	0	–	0	0	**–**
Grand Total:	**360**	**237**	**39.7%**	**296**	**205**	**40.9%**

ABSORPTION RATES – ATTACHED HOMES

- The overall absorption rate for attached homes for July 2017 was **40.9%**, up slightly from June 2016's 39.7%.

Fee Simple Detached	July 2016			July 2017		
Absorption Rates	Listings	Contracts	Rate	Listings	Contracts	Rate
$299,999 & under	17	8	32.0%	11	3	**21.4%**
$300,000 - $499,999	160	84	34.4%	123	73	**37.2%**
$500,000 - $749,999	598	148	19.8%	455	158	**25.8%**
$750,000 - $999,999	272	53	16.3%	267	51	**16.0%**
$1,000,000 - $1,499,999	94	8	7.8%	112	12	**9.7%**
$1,500,000 & higher	77	0	0.0%	84	3	**3.4%**
Grand Total:	**1218**	**301**	**19.8%**	**1052**	**300**	**22.2%**

ABSORPTION RATES – DETACHED HOMES

- July 2017's absorption rate for detached homes was **22.0%**, an increase from the 19.8% rate from July 2016.
- And as we have seen in the other property types, the absorption rates are higher for the lower-priced categories.