



Housing prices get a little bit heftier



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Lee County existing home prices edged up in February as foreclosures continued to fall - even as the national market continued its long decline.

Don't expect to see much change anytime soon in the local numbers as things keep bumping along the bottom, local experts said.

The median price of a single-family home sold with the help of a Realtor increased 4 percent in February - from \$87,900 to \$91,500 - from a year earlier, according to statistics released Monday by Florida Realtors. February's price was up 3 percent from January's \$88,500.

Also, the number of single-family homes sold fell 12 percent from 1,259 to 1,106 year over year. But February's sales were less than 1 percent up from January's 1,072.

Nationally, fewer Americans bought previously occupied homes in February and

those who did purchased them at steep discounts. The weak sales and rise in foreclosures pushed home prices down to their lowest level in nearly nine years, according to a separate National Realtors Association report released Monday.

Sales of previously occupied homes fell last month to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.88 million, the report states. That's down 9.6 percent from 5.4 million in January. The pace is far below the 6 million homes a year that economists say represents a healthy market.

In Lee County, one of the markets hardest hit by the housing collapse, prices reached their maximum of \$322,300 in December 2005 before a long decline that flattened out in 2009.

The local numbers may not be great, but they're better than the alternative, said real estate broker Denny Grimes, president of Denny Grimes & Co. at Royal Shell in Fort Myers.

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"Our market is basically stable," he said. "If we were a patient in a hospital on life support, stable would be pretty good."

That's not to say that further declines are out of the question, Grimes said. "I think there's going to be a second shoe falling when and if the shadow inventory (homes yet to be foreclosed on by lenders or owned by investors who will eventually sell) and bank-owned inventory is released."

But until then, demand and supply are strong and prices and sales aren't moving much. "It doesn't suggest anything is going on," Grimes said.

Steve Koffman, a real estate broker with Century 21 Sunbelt in Cape Coral, said he doubts there will be a spike in foreclosures that changes the equilibrium.


"Everybody keeps talking about that second wave," he said. "I don't think the banks are going to speed up their processes."

Nor are banks hoarding a huge inventory to be released later, Koffman said. "When they have them, they get rid of them."

Nationally, nearly 40 percent of the sales last month were foreclosures or short sales, when the lender accepts less than the seller owes on the mortgage. In Lee County it's about 60 percent.

The median sales price nationally fell 5.2 percent to \$156,100 in February, the lowest level since April 2002.

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