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Katie Curnutte - The Warren Group

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Warren Group's R.E. Record Search assists appraisers Just four years ago, 6,270 homes changed hands in Mass. It was a boom market; sales were up 26.4% compared to sales in Sept. 2002. Sales would stay fairly steady the next Sept., falling just 1.7% to 6,164, according to The Warren Group.

These statistics were unprecedented in the 20 years that The Warren Group had been tracking home sales in Mass. More homes were sold during Sept. Work was plentiful for those in residential real estate.

But the story was different this past Sept. Sales were down 40.4% from that high point in 2003 to 3,735, real estate agents were having trouble selling the homes on the market and, since fewer homes were changing hands, appraisers were not getting as much work.

Since the middle of 2006, monthly sales started showing regular double-digit declines. Sales had been falling for about a year-and-a-half, but prices were still rising and the drop in sales was not dramatic.

The bust in the housing market has been hard on residential appraisers. In 2004 and 2005, they had 10 jobs a week. Now many are struggling to find five jobs in a month, said Marie Wentling, The Warren Group's channel sales manager and an appraiser.

"Appraisers who have been working for lenders are hard hit by this downturn," said Shaun Fitzgerald, president of the MBREA.

Most housing experts agree it will take awhile before the housing market recovers. Many say a turnaround will not be evident until late in 2008, at the earliest. Although some have left the field, many appraisers are trying to find new and creative ways to find work, and more efficient ways to do the jobs they have. One tool that has found favor with appraisers is The Warren Group's real estate record search. It boasts a database of every sale recorded back to 1987, and gives in-depth detail about the homes themselves.

"Many appraisers are looking for ways to market themselves to clients other than the typical lenders they have been working with for many years," Wentling said. "Some are building relationships with attorneys to get estate settlement and divorce work. Others are networking with financial planners or even marketing themselves directly to home owners, to give them an unbiased professional opinion of value so that they can incorporate this information into their retirement plans, decide to sell, or wait a while. Now is a good time for professional appraisers to take stock in their talents, get creative with their marketing, and find alternative revenue streams."

Some appraisers who have depended on lender work stay busy with consulting assignments these days, said Fitzgerald. They appraise a property before it goes into foreclosure, or once the petition to foreclose has been filed. They can work with the lender who becomes the property owner and real estate agents to determine the value of the home, and consult with them about the direction of the housing market.

Several appraisers have found value with one of The Warren Group's new products, Warren Group Foreclosures, at www.warrengroupforeclosures.com. The product has helped some appraisers who are also investors, but can also give appraisers interested in foreclosure-related appraisals to find business leads.

Because this kind of local expertise has become so important, some areas have experienced virtually no downturn, while prices are falling by double digits in others, appraisers who have stuck to one area for many years have become more valuable than those who have spent time in many areas of the state.

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