

Home prices rising comfortably for owners

By Dave Skidmore
Associated Press Writer

(AP) - The value of most Americans' homes is rising faster than inflation, except in such Northeastern cities as Hartford, Conn., and Syracuse, N.Y., and a few other scattered metro areas.

Nationally, the median price of existing homes increased by \$4,700 to \$123,700 in the April-June quarter, meaning half sold for more and half for less, the National Association of Realtors said Tuesday.

The 3.9 percent gain from the same quarter a year ago was well ahead of the 2.3 percent inflation rate during the period.

Realtors President Russell K. Booth said the strong economy and job market are supporting

■ Some of the strongest gains in the country came in the Midwest. The median rose 10.7 percent in Lansing, 10.5 percent in Kalamazoo, 7.8 percent in Grand Rapids and 6.7 percent in Detroit.

consumers' confidence and helping the housing market.

"People are willing to make big-ticket purchases and long-term financial commitments," he said.

Of 133 metropolitan areas surveyed by the Realtors, only 26

reported price declines. And three of the country's four regions saw gains even better than the national figure.

In the South, the median price rose 5 percent to \$108,300; in the West, 4.8 percent to \$160,800, and in the Midwest, 4.6 percent to \$105,600. However, the median price advanced just 1.8 percent to \$145,900 in the Northeast.

"The Northeast's economy is still the weakest. It's doing well, but job growth and income growth are lagging the rest of the country," said economist Mark Zandi of Regional Financial Associates of West Chester, Pa.

The median price fell 3.5 percent in Syracuse, 3.2 percent in Hartford, 0.6 percent in Boston,

and 1.1 percent in Buffalo, N.Y.; was unchanged in Newark, N.J.; inched just 0.7 percent higher in Providence, R.I., and rose a modest 1.8 percent in New York.

Other declines were scattered. The steepest came in Honolulu. Hurt by lack of Japanese investment, the median fell 10.4 percent but was still the highest in the country, at \$300,000.

In Bradenton, Fla., the median fell 5.8 percent; in South Bend, Ind., 5.1 percent; Jacksonville, Fla., 4.7 percent; and Charleston, W.Va., and Shreveport, La., both 4.4 percent.

Some of the strongest gains in the country came in the Midwest, particularly Michigan, Nebraska and Missouri. The median rose 10.7 percent in Lansing, Mich.; 10.5 percent in

Kalamazoo, Mich., 7.8 percent in Grand Rapids, Mich., and 6.7 percent in Detroit.

It increased 9.2 percent in Lincoln, Neb.; 7.4 percent in Omaha, Neb.; 7.6 percent in St. Louis, and 7.5 percent with Kansas City, Mo.

Zandi said the strength of housing markets in the Midwest is explained by "nearly non-existent" unemployment rates in many cities - 1.7 percent in Lincoln, for instance.

"People are working and they're starting to get better wages," he said. "People are feeling good, so they're starting to trade up and buy bigger homes."

Other cities with big increases included Gainesville, Fla., 12.5 percent; Fort Lauderdale, Fla., 9.6 percent; Phoenix, 9.1 percent;

Portland, Ore., 8.4 percent; Corpus Christi, Texas, 8.1 percent; and Houston and Davenport, Iowa, both 7.7 percent.

In addition to Honolulu, other high-cost areas included San Francisco, \$288,600; Orange County, Calif., \$228,400; Bergen, N.J., \$203,500; Newark, N.J., \$198,600; Boston, \$194,200; San Diego, \$183,400; New York, \$177,700; Middlesex, N.J., \$176,000; and Los Angeles, \$173,200.

The lowest medians were in Ocala, Fla., \$64,100; Waterloo, Iowa, \$64,800; Beaumont, Texas, \$69,000; Saginaw, Mich., \$72,800; Youngstown, Ohio, \$72,800; Amarillo and El Paso, Texas, and South Bend, Ind., all \$74,100; Shreveport, \$75,200; and Davenport, \$75,600.

Retaining walls can add character to your yard or surrounding area

By Popular Mechanics
For AP Special Features

Retaining walls are a real staple of the landscape business. Not only can they solve a wealth of erosion problems but they can also lend a lot of character to otherwise uninspired grounds. And a decent, serviceable wall can be made out of a wide range of different materials to suit just about anyone's personal taste.

We've all seen our share of concrete, concrete block, brick, stone, log and even railroad-tie walls. And many of these still look wonderful after years of great service. But, unfortunately, many of them don't look so wonderful. In fact, it can seem that for every wall you see in good condition, you've seen at least two that are failing. Some are cracked, some are crumbling and some are leaning so far, they seem to defy gravity.

One of the biggest troubles with traditional retaining walls is that they are difficult to build well, especially for the inexperienced worker.

It's relatively easy to erect a wall that looks good when you're done. But it's quite another to have the same wall look good in three months and still another for it to look good after a cold, hard winter.

The construction difficulties normally associated with retaining walls have all but disappeared with the invention of today's simple interlocking block systems. Several are on the market and each has a slightly different method of interlocking and a somewhat different palette of colors. (One example is the Aztec Wall System designed by Block Systems Inc., St. Paul, Minn.). But their similarities far outnumber their differences. All are made of cast concrete with a single block weighing about 20 to 30 pounds.

All are designed to be laid up dry, so no mortar and no masonry skills are necessary. And finally, because the blocks aren't joined together with mortar or by other means, hydrostatic pressure cannot build up behind the wall because the water simply seeps through the cracks between

the blocks.

All these advantages wouldn't be worth much if the blocks were ugly. But they aren't. The exposed sides of the blocks are heavily textured, which is the result of the block being cast and then broken at the factory.

The irregularity this causes lends an authentic stone-like appearance to the wall when it is finished. Is it authentic enough for everyone? Who knows? But one way to find out if you like it is to visit a masonry supply yard where various blocks are on display.

And don't be satisfied with just looking at an individual block. It's much better to see a whole wall. If the supply house doesn't have the blocks on display, ask for some locations where they know the blocks have been installed and take a ride by to see if you like the results.

Like many things that are a better idea, the manufacturers aren't giving these blocks away. Prices vary, but our shopping showed prices of about \$1.75 per block, and that included a good discount for buying in volume.



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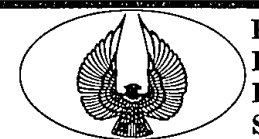
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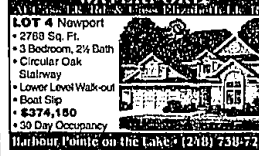
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