

Demand is Key

by Lawrence Yun, *NAR Chief Economist*

The housing market continues to show fragility. Home sales have risen broadly - by more than 20 percent from their low point last year. At the same time, home prices slid down after the homebuyer tax credit expired last summer. A review of several local MLS data indicates a fairly consistent downward trend in the ratio of the "final sales price"-to-"original listed price", implying that homes are not being priced to sell from the start.

The most recently available data are mixed. While existing home sales – which measure actual closings – fell 9.6 percent in February, pending sales – which measure contracts to purchase – rose slightly. Snowy weather in a number of areas of the country hurt both closings as well as pending contracts – as evidenced by deeper downturns in activity in the Midwest and Northeast regions.

And new construction? New home sales are stuck in a rut. Only 19,000 newly constructed homes were sold in February. That translates into 250,000 new home sales (at a seasonally annualized rate) which would represent the worst activity in at least 50 years. But the new home sales figure is more reflective of supply than demand. Homebuilders continue to express concerns about the lack of construction loans to build new homes. The banks, in order to abide by regulatory requirements, have to put aside a larger capital reserve for what are considered riskier loans and, hence, have largely shunned homebuilders (even though bank profits have recovered quite nicely the past two years). With housing starts at historic lows, there are just not that many newly built homes that can be sold. In fact, the inventory of new homes for sale is also at 50-year lows.

New homes are also selling at a higher price than normal in relation to the price of existing homes, which is likely putting off some potential buyers of new property. Why? Because the price of new homes has to account for much higher commodity prices as part of the construction cost and, therefore, new homes need to sell at above these input costs in order for the builders to turn a profit. This is hard to do in the current environment where existing homes are being discounted by 30 to 40 percent off the price of new homes. Historically, the price differential between existing homes and new ones has been 15 to 20 percent.

Perhaps the banks have concerns about lending to homebuilders because they anticipate a continuing large number of foreclosed properties that they themselves will be stuck with. Of the mortgages in serious delinquency, the share of those over 90 days late in payment has modestly come down from its peak but still remains very high at 8.5 percent at the end of 2010. In normal years, it should be less than 2 percent. Therefore, the inventory and the sale of distressed properties will continue to account for a large portion of housing activity this year and probably next year as well. The share of distressed sales, either a foreclosure or homes requiring a short sale bank approval, edged up to 39 percent of all existing-home sales in February. These distressed sales need to take place because it means getting these homes into the hands of financially sound homeowners and thus will help reset the conditions for a healthy housing market in the future.

Recent homebuyers have been highly successful with historic low default rates, and a sizable number – in fact one third of all buyers – have made their home purchase with all-cash and thus a zero chance of default.

The faster pace of incoming distressed inventory into the marketplace does not necessarily mean a further slump in the housing market. The key is demand. If these distressed inventories are quickly picked up by buyers, then no worries. But if distressed inventories linger in the marketplace then we can expect a notable further decline in home values. All indications point to plenty of ready buyers for foreclosed homes,

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not uncommonly with multiple offerings. So housing demand appears to be present at the moment and could grow as the economy turns for the better.

The number of homes available for sale at the end of February – both normal and distressed properties – was 3.5 million, but look for the inventory to climb to about 4 million by the end of this summer. This upswing in inventory is a normal seasonal occurrence – more homes are listed through the spring and summer months. The rising inventory will be met by rising demand through those spring and summer months. The peak months for sales closings are May, June, and July with sales roughly doubling that in winter months (on a non-seasonally adjusted, raw number basis).

Last year the demand arose from the home buyer tax credit. This year the demand will come from improving job market conditions. The latest jobs figures (released April 1) show that a net 216,000 new jobs were created in March alone, with 478,000 job creations in the first three months of this year. We are on track for a 2 million new jobs for 2011. Yes, mortgage rates will surely rise – but not alarmingly. Expect around a 5.7 percent average rate on a 30-year fixed mortgage by year-end, up from the current 5 percent rate.

The second-home market should also begin to show a recovery this year. Stock market gains are providing the financial wherewithal for wealthier households to buy vacation homes. Investors, looking for diversification and an inflation hedge, are looking at deeply discounted homes to generate rental income. The median price of an investor purchased home in 2010 was cheap – at \$94,000. That is certainly better than putting money in the bank and getting essentially nothing in return, as well as protecting against the possibility of devalued currency from potential rising inflation and very high budget deficits. One thing that was lacking for the second home market in the past two years was mortgages to buy a non-primary occupant homes – because government-backed mortgages are not there for these properties. An eye-popping 59 percent of investor home purchases were made with cash in 2010.

Finally, as the housing market is trying to get back on a firm recovery track, we should be wary of unintended consequences of some of the consumer protection legislation that is out there – such as that focused on what we call QRMs. The new rule on Qualified Residential Mortgages (QRMs) could mean significantly reduced credit availability. The QRM rule says that a lender must set aside additional capital for any losses (i.e., reserve fund) and for 'skin-in-the-game' to loan funds for what are considered non-qualified mortgages. But the end result could be that mortgages become readily available to only the upper-income segment of society. Many working and middleclass Americans - who may have good though not pristine credit scores – may have to scrape up a very large downpayment, perhaps upwards of 20 percent, in order to buy a home.

Prior to 2000, the housing market was just fine and stable. Many middle-class households purchased homes and thus became successful homeowners even though they did not put 20 percent down. That is because households stayed well within their budget and lenders did not hand out funny toxic mortgages. We need to simply revisit what worked in the past rather than imposing onerous new regulations. Government regulatory actions, though perhaps emanating from goodhearted intentions, unfortunately can lead to unintended harsh outcomes. In the case of housing, they could wind up denying working-class Americans the opportunity to become homeowners. The QRM rule could well be the most important regulation impacting the housing market in upcoming years. Washington bureaucrats should not jeopardize what is a staple of the American Dream – homeownership.