

Most optimistic homeowners still buying into the American dream



The Home Front By Don DeBat

Most American homeowners are eternal optimists. They are always looking forward just beyond the cloudy horizon and hoping their humble abode will appraise for more money than it is worth today.

Thanks to the federal tax credit, an abundance of FHA-insured loan closings and other help from Uncle Sam, it appears that the nation has weathered the housing downturn and now is beginning a long recovery.

Existing-home sales data indicates that the tax credit brought tens of thousands of buyers into the marketplace, reduced

inventories, and helped stabilize home prices around the country, according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR).

"We needed the tax credit to help normalize the market," said Vicki L. Cox Golder, 2010 NAR president. "Now it's time for the market to stand on its own legs."

There are strong indications that new-home construction also is coming back, economists say. U.S. housing starts increased for the second straight month in April to the highest level since October of 2008. Most of the revival came in the single-family home sector, where starts jumped 10.2 percent from the previous month to a seasonally-adjusted rate of 593,000 units.

Meanwhile, home-loan interest rates are near rock bottom. In late May, Freddie Mac reported that benchmark 30-year fixed mortgages dipped to an average of 4.78 percent, the lowest the average has been since early December when it hit 4.71 percent.

NAR believes now is the time for Realtors who specialize in residential sales to educate clients and help them "find a home they can afford in a neighborhood they love," Golder said.

Realtors also are lobbying hard in Washington D.C. to unfreeze the home-finance pipeline to ensure a steady flow of capital for mortgages, Golder said.

"It is still smart to buy a house or condominium—not only

because of attractive interest rates and homeowner tax deductions, but because home is where we make memories, build our future and feel secure," Golder noted.

"After all, we're still a nation of home owners," Golder said. "Despite all the troubles we've been through as a nation, the homeownership rate in the first quarter of 2010 stood at 67.1 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau."

There's no doubt that most Americans still believe in the dream of homeownership. That's why every spring they mow the lawn and plant shrubs and flowers, and stain the deck. They water the lawn and tend those plants all summer long, then rake leaves and clean the gutters in autumn. And when winter comes they fill the backyard bird feeder and shovel snow off the driveway.

It's all about keeping the place up, enjoying those summer barbecues, birthday events, Little League championships, holiday parties and the laughter of children.

And hopefully, when the time comes, you'll find that happy buyer who is willing to pay more for your house than you did.

Don DeBat's weekly real estate column is syndicated by DeBat Media Services. For more home-buying information visit his website at: www.dondebat.net.

Amnesty Int'l condemns shooting of boy by U.S. Border Patrol



LONDON-- Amnesty International condemned the fatal shooting of a 15-year-old Mexican boy by a U.S. Border Patrol officer, who fired across the border at a group of young men that were reportedly throwing stones.

The officer allegedly opened fire on the group from the U.S. side of Paso del Norte border crossing June 7, killing secondary school student Sergio Adrian Hernandez.

His mother said he was a good student who never got into trouble. He was the youngest of five children, played on two soccer teams, and had just finished junior high school, she said.

Above his casket was a photo of the youth wearing his soccer uniform and his junior high school grade cards, which showed A's and B's.

"The shooting across the border appears to have been a grossly disproportionate response and flies in the face of international standards which compel police to use firearms only as a last resort, in response to an immediate, deadly threat that cannot be contained through lesser means," said Susan Lee, American Director at London-based Amnesty International.

Border patrol officers had been responding to a group of "suspected illegal aliens," according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is leading the investigation into the killing.

The FBI said an agent "fired his weapon

several times" after some suspects ran back across the border into Mexico while refusing to stop throwing rocks. The agent is currently on administrative leave.

The shooting happened beneath a railroad bridge linking the two nations. Late Tuesday night a banner appeared on the bridge that said in English, "U.S. Border Patrol we worry about the violence in Mex and murders and now you. Viva Mexico!"

Amnesty International has called for a full, impartial and transparent investigation into the incident, which comes less than two weeks after the death of a Mexican immigrant who was tasered by U.S. Border Patrol police while being deported at the San Isidoro border crossing in California.

The 32-year-old migrant, Anastasio Hernandez, died. The San Diego medical examiner's office ruled that it was a homicide.

The organization is also calling for an urgent review by the Department of Homeland Security of the sue of force by Border Patrol and immigration police, with stricter standards being imposed on the use of firearms and electro-shock weapons.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon said Tuesday that his government "will use all the resources available to protect the rights of its citizens."

Teachers Union files CPS about rise in classroom sizes



CHICAGO--The Chicago Teachers Union took action against the city for attempting to increase the Chicago Public Schools classroom sizes to 35 students.

In an unprecedented move that hinges on a decades old municipal code, the Teachers Union filed a lawsuit against the school system, citing overcrowding. A code passed in 1958--after the

Our Lady of Angels School fire that killed 92 students-- requires all classrooms have at least 20 square feet per body.

That means classrooms of 35 students and teachers require at least 720 square feet of space. The union's suit will include affidavits from teachers who have measured their rooms.

"On top of the educational problems it would create, such huge class sizes would violate the city's health and safety codes in thousands of our classrooms," Union President Marilyn Stewart said in a statement. "So whether you look at it from an educational standpoint or a healthy and safety standpoint what CEO Ron Huberman and the Board of Education are trying to do is unconscionable."

The Chicago Public Schools estimate it can trim about \$125 million off its budget by increasing class sizes from the maximum of 32 to 35 students.

Chinese astronauts feasted on dog meat

SHANGHAI-- Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei revealed the menu on-board the spacecraft he commanded consisted of dog meat during the Shenzhou Five mission in 2003.

In his autobiography, "The Nine Levels Between Heaven and Earth," the 44-year-old astronaut listed the menu which included braised chicken, steamed fish and dog meat from Huajiang county in Guangdong, which is famed for its nutritional benefits in China.

"Many of my friends were curious about what we ate in space and think that astronauts must have some expensive delicacies like shark's fin or abalone," he wrote. "Actually we ate quite normal food, there is no need to keep it a secret," he said.

A local proverb in the south of China is that "Huajiang dog is better for you than ginseng," he said, referring to the medicinal root that plays a vital role in traditional Chinese medicine.

He added that the diet had been specially drawn up for the astronauts by Chinese nutritionists and that the food had been purchased from special suppliers in Beijing. Dog is widely eaten in northern China, where it is believed to help battle the winter cold. The menu was still in use last year when Chinese astronauts conducted their first spacewalk.

Nevertheless, the founder of Animals Asia



is not a happy camper. "Yang Liwei is a role model for so many young people and he is one of China's greatest heroes," said Jill Robinson. "We hope he might recognize dogs also as heroes. They found survivors after the Sichuan earthquake and protected people from potential terrorists during the Olympic Games. Surely they deserve more."

There is a movement by Beijing pet owners to ban the killing of dogs for China's dinner tables.

Mafia mob boss says Amanda Knox innocent in student's murder



ROME, Italy-- An Italian weekly, Oggi, reported Wednesday that a former Mafia mob boss said that his brother killed Meredith Kercher, not the three convicted of the murder, including 22-year-old Amanda Knox.

"It's my brother who killed Meredith on the night of Nov. 1 2007. Amanda, Raffaele Sollecito and Rudy Guede are innocent," Luciano Aviello, 41, told Knox's lawyers in March, according to Oggi.

"My brother confessed the murder to me and gave me the blood-stained knife and a set of keys to hide," Aviello said, adding he would help investigators find these items, if the court in the central Italian town of Perugia decided to hear him. Knox's lawyers have asked the court to hear Aviello in the appeal trial. However, since beginning to collaborate with Italian justice, some of his allegations have proved unreliable, Oggi reported.

Aviello spent 17 years in jail for crimes

and ties with the Naples -area Camorra crime syndicate. The court refused to hear him three times, judging him unreliable.

Kercher was found Nov. 2, 2007 in a pool of blood under a duvet with multiple stab wounds to the neck in her room in the cottage she shared with Knox.

According to Aviello, his brother Antonio and an Albanian man killed Kercher in a botched burglary attempt. The two, looking to steal paintings, ended up in Kercher's house where the British student found them and began screaming. Antonio Aviello tried blocking her and then stabbed her.

Aviello and the Albanian man would have then found Ivorian Guede in the bathroom of the house and intimidated him into silence.

Knox was sentenced to 28 years in prison for the murder in what the prosecutor called a "drug-fueled game that turned violent." She has appealed the conviction.