Search Basics for Buyers

By Adam Garrett

In this document you'll find:

I. Search basics:

1. **Some buyers don't even have their agents set up searches and just use buyer's agents for the many other aspects of a home search (see section IX), but buyers working with agents can benefit greatly by using their agent's access to MLS (or more than 1 MLS) to activate searches that can have more detail than public websites due to search features unique to MLS of local areas, search templates that agents can work hours on (dozens of hours in some cases), & otherwise.**
2. **Basic portal navigation**
3. Exploring **flood zones** within the portal
4. **Exploring area online** outside the portal
5. **Commute cost**
6. How to get **property search update emails texted to you**. (I **highly recommend** it)
7. **Importance of Activating multiple searches** (if applicable) - if you have had more than one search set up with me (whether a few on one MLS or if we set up searches on multiple MLS), it's important to activate each one. Often more than 1 search is best since 1 search often doesn't cover all properties possible within your criteria. Be sure to click on "View all listings" within

each initial search (if a Matrix search - if Navica, click the top link in the email). If you don't, you won't get new ones of that search type.

8. MLS has clear **labeling of properties** based on the main measure of status i.e. **pending** and MLS also labels whether it is a **contingent** property or not, which **means it's under contract even if it's active** on REIN MLS.
    A. If it's active & not contingent, typically it's available. The accuracy of that diminishes Saturday & Sunday, especially if Saturday-Sunday occur on days 1-5 since initial listing or since a recent price reduction of 3% or more.
    B. If it's active & contingent (i.e. on REIN MLS, while that's not typical on Williamsburg MLS or CVR though it can happen by special request by the seller/agent in Williamsburg MLS) it means it's under contract with a buyer with some contingencies.
    C. If it's withdrawn, it means it was withdrawn by the seller. There are many reasons why it might be withdrawn, such as title problems, home inspection problems, or the seller deciding that they no longer want to sell due to some life change. Sometimes, properties get withdrawn and then put back on the market quickly after in order to look like a new listing.
    D. If it's withdrawn & contingent, it means it was most recently under contract prior to being withdrawn by the seller. When that happens, typically there was some problem that occurred, such as title problems or extensive home inspection repairs needed that led to an offer being withdrawn.
    E. If it's expired, it means that the listing recently expired with the listing agent after going for the period that the agent & seller initially agreed to. It might be back on the market shortly after, the seller might wait some more time before listing again, or the seller might not to list again at all any time in the next 5 years.
    F. If it's listed as "Fall Thru" it went under contract and then the offer fell through after problems or after the buyer got cold feet. For whatever reason, the seller decided to not put it back on the market, but it could be put back on the market in the near or distant future in many cases.
    G. If it's "coming soon" it's being marketed prior to being available for showing. Because some MLS consider it a violation of the VA law, some MLS have it as an option (i.e. Williamsburg MLS, CBRAR, & CVR) & some don't (i.e. REIN). Sometimes the coming soon status sells a property to a buyer sight unseen before showings are supposed to start. While I typically don't recommend a sight unseen purchase without even a video, if a home is in this coming soon status and has offers that are being considered for acceptance prior to the list date, making an offer without seeing it first something to consider with the home inspection contingency to help protect you on resale homes. Here is more on whether or not you should consider making an offer on a property that you haven't seen.

II. When to buy

In my page dedicated to the subject I go over:

1. Finances

2. Your credit (unless buying in $)

3. Your living needs

4. The rental alternative

5. The market in your considered area

6. Interest rate projections/history (unless buying in $)

7. The kind of loan/financial assistance you'll be using if applicable

8. The home you currently live in

9. The home you'll choose

10. Dispelling myths (i.e. bubble)

See also a comparison of when to buy vs when to rent

III. The best search

1. **20-50 properties** to weed through ideally

In my opinion, your total search should have at least 20 properties to weed through, & if not among 1 or multiple searches from me, your criteria is likely too narrow, while more than 50 is hard for some to manage depending on their time available to dedicate. Also, when only a low # of properties meets criteria in a certain price range, with many more properties in a higher price range of that same criteria, typically there are some pretty bad negatives negatively impacting the value of that property (i.e a high crime area, a tear down, etc.) and/or it's going to go far above list price.

There are some exceptions to the 20 property rule. For instance, it would be reasonable for a buyer to look for multi-family properties on the VA Peninsula despite the fact that there are only 7 properties listed on the primary MLS of that area on 1/31/22 (without narrowing by any factors such as price or sq ft). It would also be reasonable for a buyer to narrow down further by price even if it caused there to be <7 properties in their criteria. In the vast majority of cases though, the 20+ properties rule applies. If you have a search of less than 20 properties, it’s important to note that the search process will typically be longer than usual & there may be only a trickle of new properties that hit the market within your criteria.

2. **Modifying your search**

If you'd ever like to make modifications to your search, have any real estate related questions, would like a showing(s), are no longer interested in this search or buying, or if there is any other way that I can be of service, let me know. Adjustments are typically best done on Zoom with me.

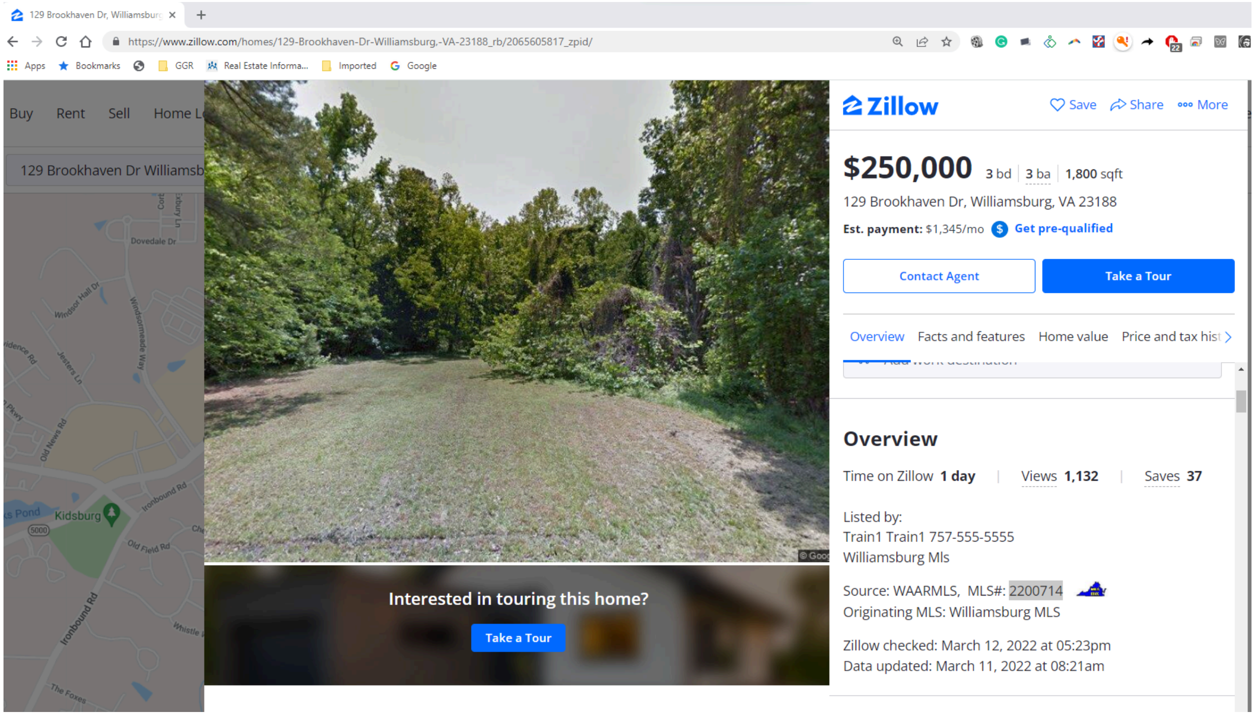
If you want to exclude certain areas (other than whole cities, zipcodes, school districts, & subdivisions which are much easier to exclude), it's especially best to do so in a Zoom session with me using remote desktop. Keep in mind though that drawing an area specifically targeting one of the protected classes is strictly prohibited, so please do not engage in that.

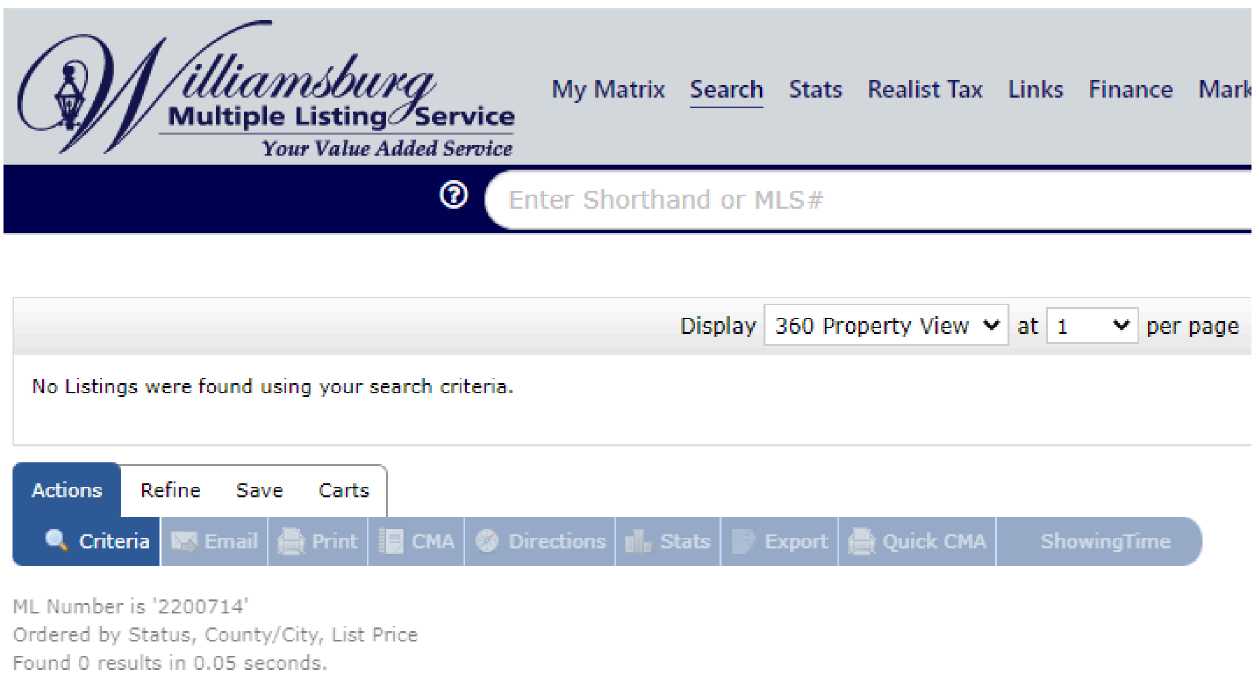
3. **Not all criteria are required,** so if you add criteria where the agent didn't input any information, you'll rule that property out if it's a required element, whether or not the home has something. When I list a home, I try to be extremely thorough, adding as many positive elements as possible. Some agents do the opposite, adding the minimum required and skipping all non-required elements, or close to it. If you add a number of non-required criteria, you could accidentally weed out the perfect home that happens to be listed by a lazy or careless agent.
4. **The more criteria in your search, the higher the likelihood of agent error negatively impacting the search**. For instance:
    a. In REIN, we can rule out properties where agency approval is listed as "none". That would exclude many properties that would require a renovation loan or cash from the search. That said, I've seen where an older agent who had sold a few hundred properties still input "none" there on a property that would be fine with a conventional loan, despite the fact that only a small percentage of the homes they listed had "none" checked.
    b. We can also rule out properties with no water, but I've seen where an agent was likely making a mistake by stating a property had no water.
    c. We can include only properties with a garage, but I've seen where a sloppy high volume agent who I had previous bad experiences with checked the box for "No" garage on a home that clearly had a garage.

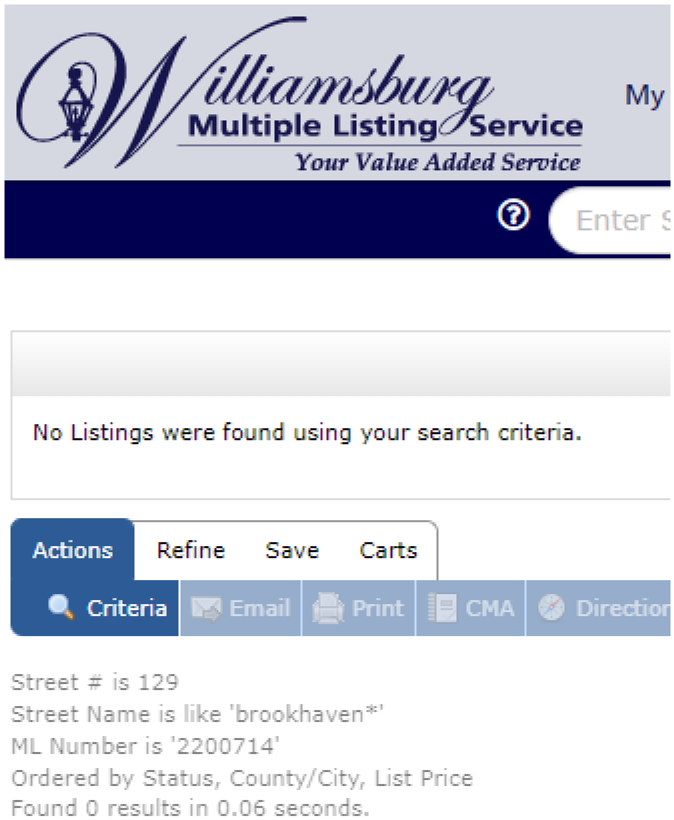
IV. MLS search vs public websites

Advantages of using the portal over public websites (i.e. Zillow, Realtor.com, Trulia, Craigslist, etc.):

1. Ability to weed out many properties already under contract with no sign of it on public websites which I do by default in the searches I create for you (while your loved properties list won't exclude those). Unlike the public websites, MLS has clear labeling of pending and contingent properties, so if you like or love it before it goes under contract where it would no longer appear in the search, it's easy to spot.
2. Built-in flood zone feature superior to many real estate websites
3. Higher level of accuracy & much higher likelihood of a property being listed from a reputable source with lower chances of fraud. I've seen a home listed on Zillow with an MLS number and supposedly being listed via MLS, but wasn't at all listed on that MLS & the phone number listed for the agent was bogus.


129 Brookhaven Dr, Williamsbur
https://www.zillow.com/homes/129-Brookhaven-Dr-Williamsburg,-VA-23188_rb/2065605817_zpid/
Apps Bookmarks GGR Real Estate Informa... Imported Google
Buy Rent Sell Home L
129 Brookhaven Dr Williamsb
Zillow
Save Share More
$250,000 3 bd 3 ba 1,800 sqft
129 Brookhaven Dr, Williamsburg, VA 23188
Est. payment: $1,345/mo Get pre-qualified
Contact Agent
Take a Tour
Overview Facts and features Home value Price and tax hist
Overview
Time on Zillow 1 day | Views 1,132 | Saves 37
Listed by:
Train1 Train1 757-555-5555
Williamsburg Mls
Source: WAARMLS, MLS#: 2200714
Originating MLS: Williamsburg MLS
Zillow checked: March 12, 2022 at 05:23pm
Data updated: March 11, 2022 at 08:21am
Interested in touring this home?
Take a Tour


Williamsburg Multiple Listing Service
Your Value Added Service
My Matrix Search Stats Realist Tax Links Finance Mark
Enter Shorthand or MLS#
Display 360 Property View at 1 per page
No Listings were found using your search criteria.
Actions Refine Save Carts
Criteria Email Print CMA Directions Stats Export Quick CMA ShowingTime
ML Number is '2200714'
Ordered by Status, County/City, List Price
Found 0 results in 0.05 seconds.



4. **Enhanced search options of agents specific to MLS**, such as the ability to exclude short sales, specify 2 car + garage, multiple cities/counties in 1 search, downstairs master, etc.
5. More detailed listing information unique to that home
6. Templates that I have saved as an agent that have taken hours to create in some cases
7. Ability to like, love, trash, and make notes on properties online where your agent can see in real-time
8. Skip a lot of scam websites.

When compiling a list of properties to see, **if ever searching outside of an active search** (even within the Matrix portal) **that I set up for you, I recommend checking their online availability**, both looking on Matrix **to ensure that they are "active" & looking for any any "contingencies" (which mean it's under contract, even if active).**

Advantages of public websites:
1. While most of Hampton Roads relies on 1 MLS, REIN, if searching in a city/county with substantial MLS crossover (i.e. Williamsburg or Gloucester) and you are running 2 or 3 MLS searches it can be tedious to weed through the same listings twice, though the same is true if using multiple public websites & I'd argue it's even worse to find phantom property availability which is much more common on public websites

2. Availability of some **FSBO properties** where the seller has failed to put the property on MLS in any way - while FSBO's are often overpriced, bad marketing like that can lower the final price tag at times. Examples of where to find properties not on MLS (around 5-10% of properties in most Hampton Roads cities for sale, & around 40% of rentals) that will not come from these searches.
3. Some properties are added to **off the wall MLS** by Realtors (with the seller likely being unaware, though if they knew how bad that is, they should fire their Realtor on the spot) that are not even the 4th most prominent MLS in a certain city. These off the wall properties can be found on cites like Zillow. If you're looking a city where even 5% of homes or more are in an MLS that your Realtor doesn't have access to, you should definitely be looking on Zillow for what's missing.

Advantages of specific public websites:

Zillow:

Has superior searches by certain acreage while MLS, if an agent fails to include acreage, does not default to tax records like Zillow does.

Trulia & Zillow:

School district ratings built into the system (though keep in mind that ratings with different algorithms such as on Niche.com could paint a different picture)

Trulia & Realtor.com used to have **crime maps**, with Trulia's being better than anything currently available (you could type in an address, see a better color coded map than what's available on Crimegrade, and you could see specific crimes on the map, all in 1 place) but both don't any more, citing concerns about fair housing. Especially since me expressing my opinion about a neighborhood is very limited, it's important that I am able to share resources for that on where to look. No matter your race or other protected class, it's still a good idea to have an indication of crime in the neighborhood prior to making a purchase. There are a number of places to look:

https://crimegrade.org/ - has a color coded crime map available that is the **first place I suggest looking for crime**. Type in a zip code, then locate the property in question on the map by comparing that map to Google Maps or directly within your MLS portal map view.

https://spotcrime.com/ has a map that seems to be the most comprehensive no matter the city or county & allows you to see where recent specific crimes have occurred with dates & details, though the radius of crime seems to be based on trying to find the closest few dozen crimes or so based on an address.

Norfolk also has a crime map locally on https://www.crimemapping.com/

Some locales (i.e. Franklin, Hampton, James City County, Portsmouth, Powhatan, & Richmond) are present on this other map: https://communitycrimemap.com/

Here is Newport News' crime page, though as of 3/3/22 the map section doesn't show any NN crime.

For more details, see:

https://www.adambgarrett.com/post/zillow-search-setup

V. MLS search vs each other

Here are the MLS I have access to for buyers as of 1/31/22:

[**Spreadsheet of 5 MLS compared (which one is most important per city/county w raw data showing # of sales in past 180 days for each MLS as of 10/20/2021)**]

Disadvantage of CBRAR/CVR vs REIN:

1. POA/HOA fee criteria shouldn't be input into CBRAR/CVR unless you want an HOA/Condo fee minimum, which is relatively rare among buyers. The reason why is that while you can narrow down by fees in CBRAR/CVR, if you do, properties with no fee won't come up in the search, while with REIN, a search with no minimum will include properties with no fees. If you really want to narrow down by fees without a minimum, it's best to have 2 separate searches, 1 with condos/hoas, and 1 without.
2. Inability to weed out properties listed as fixer upper in a seamless way for at least some fixer uppers due to a "fixer upper" option available with REIN
3. Inability to weed out properties by the financing possible to purchase them
4. Inability to weed out short sales

Advantages of CBRAR/CVR vs REIN:

1. In some areas, there is minimal presence of REIN, and CBRAR/CVR are the primary MLS used.
2. While CBRAR/CVR still doesn't default to tax records for searches by acreage (like Zillow does) for listing agents too lazy to input acreage into their listings, the culture of CBRAR/CVR is more likely to include acreage in the search than REIN.
3. Sometimes, even when a property is deep in REIN territory, a CBRAR/CVR agent will list there and not in REIN (which is terrible for the seller, but that bad marketing can be good for buyers looking for a deal if the seller is unaware as they most often are in that situation)

    5. Coming soon listings are available in CBRAR/CVR MLS, while unavailable in REIN, giving buyers an advantage for arranging showings right after a home hits the market with more advanced notice.

Williamsburg MLS:

1. While Williamsburg MLS isn't the primary MLS of **Williamsburg/JCC** surprisingly (REIN has more properties in Williamsburg/JCC last time I checked), it's still **important to use as the secondary MLS in those areas because some agents will still only advertise in Williamsburg MLS** despite it being clearly bad marketing in order to cut down on costs and time.
2. CBRAR & CVR are most similar to Williamsburg MLS
3. Coming soon listings are available in Williamsburg MLS, while unavailable in REIN, giving buyers an advantage for arranging showings right after a home hits the market with more advanced notice.

Northern Neck MLS:
Best used in Northern Neck where it's primary & as one of the non-primary MLS in the upper Middle Peninsula (i.e. Middlesex, where it has more properties than REIN, though not as many as CBRAR/CVR)

VI. Expeditious showings:

See latest version of the below here:
https://www.adambgarrett.com/post/expeditious-showings

Archives:

1. **Importance of expeditious showings**

The importance of expeditious showings is hard to underemphasize. I've seen where a buyer I was representing got in quickly on a home that had just hit the market in a hot market and was able to get under contract (with closing cost assistance even) before a cash buyer made a much stronger offer too late. While it impacted what the seller was willing to do when it came time for the home inspection, the buyer was very glad to get their offer in first.
With prices climbing & median days on market going down to only a few weeks (the lowest median time in over a decade), sometimes properties go under contract very quickly, so letting me know as soon as you are able following an email (or **text if you setup the email to text option, which I strongly suggest as something that can be the best way to keep on top of showings soon after listing**) will get you the best chances of a showing before a property is under contract. Email updates can be asap, daily, 2x/day, certain days each week (1x or 2x), or monthly. I recommend asap if you're actively searching. If you don't do asap, you'll miss out on some properties since some properties go under contract <12 hrs from the time they're input into MLS, especially if in a multiple offer situation and a buyer with a strong offer sets a tight deadline.

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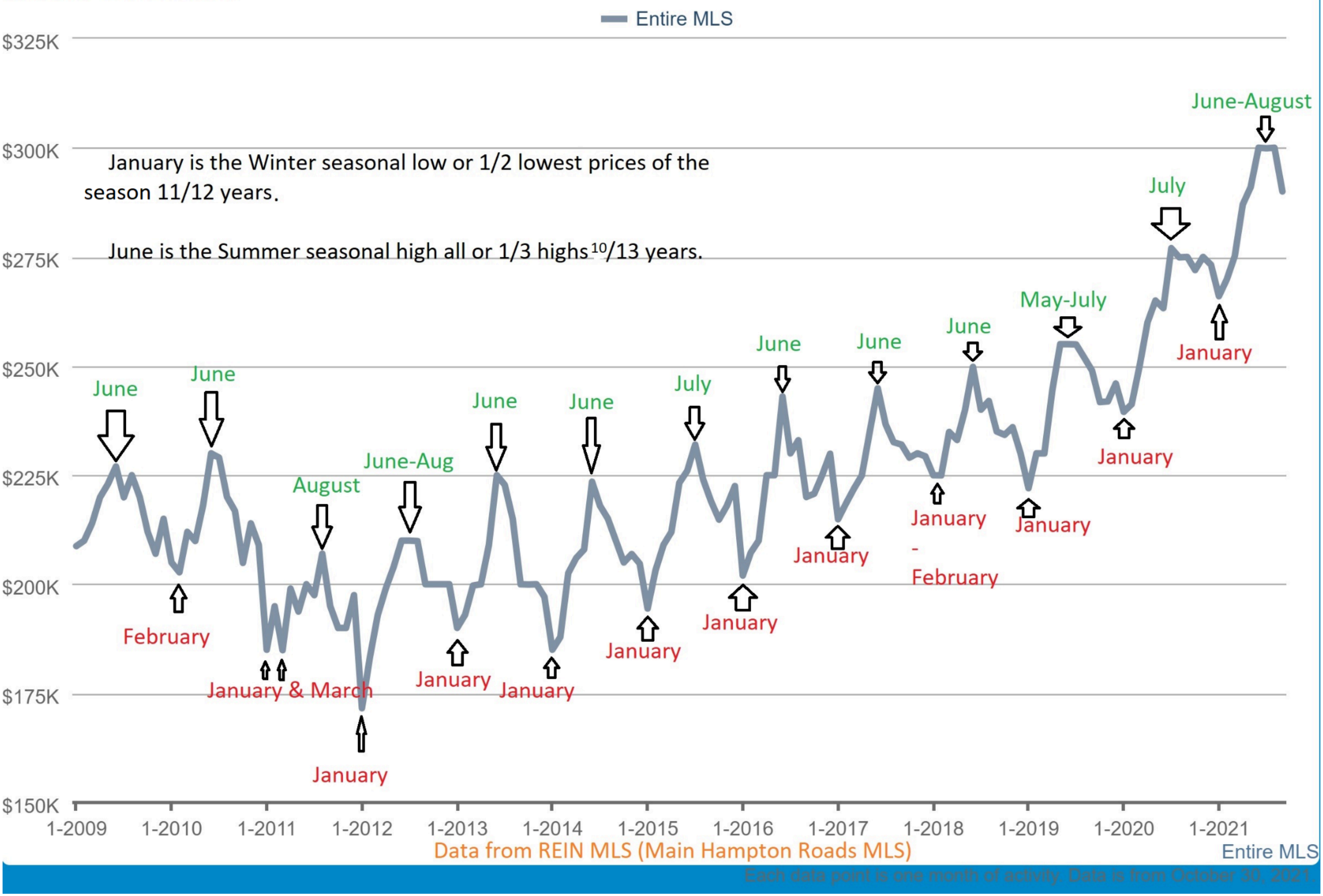
Median Sales Price



Median Days on Market:

All that said, the [best time for you to buy](#) isn't exclusively based on the market or interest rate trends.

2. **How to expedite time between a property hitting the market and your showing** (& your offer)

If a property comes up that you'd like to see, it's best to **text me** regarding a showing there or if you have any questions. If texting isn't an option, email 7578799651@tmomail.net for it to go to my texts. Be sure to CC agarrett@ggrva.com .

3. To **expedite things** further, we can have a **buyer brokerage agreement set up in advance** of you having a property or properties in mind since a buyer brokerage agreement will be needed. While not typical with most agents & not possible with some whole agencies, I allow exclusive or non-exclusive option (though the latter is still discouraged by my brokerage). I don't charge a transaction coordinator fee like some agents do. It's also a good idea to keep the buyer brokerage from expiring, since if it expires, a new agreement will be required while if you keep it from expiring all that's needed are initials on the existing form, requiring less time for buyer & for agent.
4. It's helpful to know that **most properties hit the market Monday-Friday**, with Mondays and Thursdays (excluding federal holidays) being the biggest days. The least properties hit the market on Sundays (only 1/47th of properties on a 5 week sample I checked), with the next lowest day being Saturday (1/20th in the same sample). Because of that, it's critical to be checking properties hitting the market during the week when the most listings are hitting the market.

VII. Expeditious Offers

See the latest version of the below here.

1. **Just like expeditious showings are critical** in a market that is as hot as ours, **so are expeditious offers**. Without them, you might see a property, but be unable to pull the trigger on an offer before it goes under contract. In some cases, a showing may be <5 hrs before an offer deadline, and in many cases, no deadline is present, so if offers are present, it could go any time. Sometimes, agents don't even share that offers are present even if I initially asked, they said no, and if I asked if they could let me know if offers come in the future. If you believe that I'm following up too much regarding an offer that you've told me that you want to make, keep in mind that it's because if we don't make an offer expeditiously, we may lose it. On at least one occasion, I was told by a listing agent that they accepted another offer just because it was the 1st one. On another occasion, my buyers were able to get under contract on a home because they were the 1st offer, and a significantly superior offer by someone else that was desired wasn't able to kick us out because of it & no kick out clause. That said, I want to respond to your preferences, so if you feel I'm following up too much, just share with me candidly that you're either no longer interested in an offer on that property or that you'd like less follow up even it means losing the house.
2. It's **best to get some advice from me on an offer prior to having a property in mind**, and **I can provide advice** legally about specific purchase possibilities **once** we have a **buyer brokerage agreement**. Keep in mind that I am not an attorney and thereby cannot give "legal advice" though under buyer brokerage I can provide specific real estate advice. I've developed a spreadsheet going over numerous offer elements specific to Hampton Roads offers in far more

detail & with more resources integrated than likely >99% of local agents have available for buyers. That said, I don't offer this information to those not under buyer brokerage agreement as it includes specific real estate advice that is legally limited to those under buyer brokerage.

3. In addition to getting advice about offers, it's best to **pre-fill in preferences for offers** that won't change by the specific property into the spreadsheet so that when the time comes to make your first offer, you'll be able to do it the most quickly. Even if I have an appointment with someone else immediately following my showing with you, you can get advice on the vast majority of elements of an offer without me with that spreadsheet, reducing the time needed from me, & expediting the time from when you tell me that you want to make an offer and when the offer gets put in. If you want to go over each question via Zoom, that's an option as well, and while not as thorough as going through the full spreadsheet & hyperlinked resources, takes less time for you if I'm available immediately following showings.
4. It's important to have a **preapproval or proof of funds prior to showings updated from the past 30 days**. In some cases it's best to have a fully underwritten preapproval, especially if your credit score is >780 where a hard pull in advance is unlikely to mess with your rate. A fully underwritten preapproval takes longer, but it will need to be done eventually and makes for a stronger offer. Some sellers may request that a preapproval be on the same day (or past 7 days) as the offer.
5. **Sometimes buyers** make **offers before** even a video **showing** of a property. While it is possible to make an offer contingent on a future home inspection (& to make it more competitive, contingent on just a showing without even a home inspection) **it is much better to do a showing first** in most cases. If you make an offer without even a video showing of a property, the offer is inherently a high risk to the seller, so if someone else has seen the property and also makes an offer that matches yours, all other factors the same, that offer will be prioritized typically. Some sellers/listing agents greatly reduce the clout of an offer simply because the buyer hasn't seen it in person, even if they've seen it via video, so if you make an offer without even doing that, the risks for the seller are very high.
   I add language to emails with offers (& typically a hyperlink with more details) for buyers who have seen it via video sharing about how my video showings are superior to many agents in person showings to mitigate the negative impact of a video showing on a purchase, but some sellers may never see that information if the listing agent doesn't convey it to them or copy/paste those sorts of details & it's not the kind of information that is best put in the offer itself.
   An exception where you might consider an offer without seeing it first is if a competing offer is present and you're unable to see it or do a video showing for it with an agent that can be there prior to the offer deadline when the listing agent expects that the seller will respond. The best way to avoid this problem is by being mindful of the importance of expeditious showings so that you can be the one making an offer before another buyer ever sees it or makes an offer.

VIII. Communication preferences:

Different buyers/sellers have a wide variety of communication preferences. Some people prefer for an agent to regularly call them once a week, while others prefer not to be bothered unless they reach out to the agent and prefer email. Often someone's preferences can vary based on how soon they are looking to purchase &/or sell.

Different agents have default communication means as well. **If my default methods are something that you'd like me to revise, please let me know promptly, or I will likely be unaware**. For instance, I closed on a property once with a buyer where it wasn't until after they closed that I learned that they may have dyslexia & that they didn't read most of what I sent them via email. If I had known prior, I would have engaged in more oral communication with them and would have provided a higher number of video based responses.

I know that agents who are more of a pest (in terms of frequency of contact attempts with buyers) than I am tend to close more deals than those who aren't pests, but I hope that you'll choose the agent that you think will actually do the best job for you rather than the one that bugs you the most. For some, I have been told the opposite; I have been told that I followed up too much (i.e. after sending them an offer, where time is of the essence), so it's important that you communicate your unique preferences if the way that I'm communicating with you is too much or too little.

IX. How Adam can help beyond the search

As of Nov 2020, "88% of buyers purchased their home through a real estate agent or broker."

Here is a document explaining a buyer's agent vs. a listing agent and the different roles of each.

The seller typically pays the full commission of the buyer's agent.

By having professional representation by me for your home purchase you will have access to me for the following assistance:

1. **Deciding on properties to view** beyond the search & what's visible in the listing since in some cases, even if a property looks great in a listing, invisible items available prior to showing will mean the difference of a showing and a property excluded from consideration. For example, I've seen where a home around an hr away had multiple offers (one of the questions I ask), and I asked about any known previous flooding (since in my research I noticed it was in a flood zone). Based on the agent's honest response (the whole house had flooded around 5 years ago and they did around $40k of repairs, which did not include raising the house), I expect no other agent asked that question and that if they had, none of those offers would be present. By asking the question before even going to the property, the buyer and I saved a few hrs each even if we hadn't made an offer. I've also seen properties that are being sold with lease agreements active for >6 months after closing, properties that wouldn't qualify for financing with no mention of it in the public remarks, properties that a buyer couldn't buy due to not seeking to be an owner occupant during a period where investors can't purchase, & many more.
2. **Viewing properties with both positive and negative expert feedback** (what competing agents have said about my property feedback)

3. **Viewing properties with the right gadgets/tools** putting me likely in the top 1% (if not .1%) of best tools for an agent.
4. **Making offers whether trying to win a multiple offer scenario, going below asking price, negotiating seller concessions like closing costs, or otherwise**. I've helped buyers to win in situations with as many as 8 offers on 1 property (while not going too high over the next best offer), get up to 4.5% closing cost assistance, and have helped buyers get as much as $49,000 below asking price. There is a balance to strike that is highly dependent on the situation of the property since in some cases, you only get 1 shot at an offer with no chance to change it.
5. **Helping a buyer decide on which inspections and other related items to get**. While I don't typically recommend surveys with homes in neighborhoods, in some cases my recommendation on a survey with some properties that most wouldn't have gotten one for led to the seller freely covering the cost of remediating encroachment after the seller agreed to paying for the survey (that the buyer would have typically needed to cover if they wanted one) after I identified likely encroachment prior to the offer presented to the seller that ended up being accurate.
6. **Arranging inspections** based on cost, location, availability, quality, unique offerings, etc. (there are some inspectors with mostly great reviews that I avoid, and I'm happy to share why if you'd like me to)
7. **Negotiating repairs/price reductions** after contract ratification if applicable (I've seen as high as a $10k price reduction from these negotiations with me as the buyer’s agent). Just like with an initial offer, again there is a balance to strike and I've seen where buyers that asked for too much off following inspection had sellers being less reasonable than they would have been.
8. **Walk through inspection(s)** - my walk through inspections have led to thousands of dollars in value in repair/replacement cost at times when items that were supposed to be done per the contract weren't, and those items aren't always obvious (i.e. those that require access to a crawlspace, roof, or tools to see; I've spotted problems on a roof with my drone and spotted problems in a crawlspace by going under there).
9. Closing on a home for purchase including guiding buyers through many important **preparations prior to closing.**
10. **Assisting buyers after their purchase**

X. Tenant Locating Rental

While this signature is primarily for buyers, I also help some tenants, thus the hyperlinked note for tenants.