

Forecast for the Slowing Market

by Lawrence Yun, NAR Chief Economist

The U.S. economy has entered a recession and will contract for the next three quarters, and the recovery, from the second half of 2009, will be tepid. The unemployment rate will rise through the middle of 2009 before steadily heading down. However, existing home sales will be rising despite challenging economic times.

The most important factor driving home sales is affordability. With home prices falling in many parts of the country and mortgage rates still near historic lows, affordability conditions have markedly improved. Even with rising unemployment, nearly 93 percent of households will have jobs. This 93 percent of working households (rather than 95 percent during good economic times) respond to incentives. Added measures, from the first-time homebuyer tax credit to a larger number of mortgage loans qualifying to be purchased by Fannie and Freddie and through the FHA program, will further bring homebuyers to the marketplace.








Back in the previous recession, the economy shed nearly 2 million net jobs from 2001 to 2003. All the while, existing home sales rose from 5.2 million to 6.2 million just as jobs were being cut. New home sales likewise rose from 900,000 to 1.1 million. Mortgage rates were falling and housing affordability was rising during these years. The 2 million job cuts were painful, but the economy still had 130 million job holders.

Sales have been rising in California and Florida for several months and the momentum appears to be building with even a higher year-over-year sales increases with each passing month. This trend has expanded to Arizona and Nevada and northern Virginia. Now more markets are participating in the home sales recovery including Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Colorado. Existing home sales, therefore, will likely breakout from the narrow trading range of 4.8 to 5 million of the past 12 months to 5.2 million by the year end and to 5.4 million in 2009. Even with the improvement, the next year's sales level will still be well below the 7.1 million peak sales achieved with rampant speculative buying in 2005.

New home sales will be a different story. There is an overhang of inventory and homebuilders are being forced to cut back sharply. New housing starts have fallen by about 60 percent from peak activity three years back. Because of the cutback in new home construction, the inventory of vacant new homes on the market has fallen to 408,000 as of August from nearly 600,000 just two years ago. The total inventory - new and existing combined - still remains elevated, so further reduction in building by builders will be welcomed. Because of low housing starts, new home sales will continue to tread at soft levels - under 500,000 in 2009 (far below the 1.2 million peak sales in 2005).

On the economic front, recession in itself is not a positive for the housing market because there are fewer job holders. But if a recession is accompanied by rising housing affordability, then home sales can trend higher - as is now. A prolonged deep recession, however - certainly a possibility in light of the most severely tested financial market stress since the Great Depression - can dampen consumer confidence and put up barriers to home buying. Fortunately, the economic downturn appears manageable provided a right stimulus package get through. President-Elect Obama clearly recognize the need to get the housing market moving. The two housing stimulus bills (homebuyer tax credit and higher loan limits), \$700 billion Treasury plan and the Federal Reserve's actions are designed to assure steady mortgage flow and help revive the housing sector. With it, the economy will expand and create jobs. America and its exceptional ingenuity always find a way to move past crises and back to economic prosperity.

This table reflects data available through November of 2008.

Monthly Indicator	Recent Statistics	Likely Direction Over the Next Six Months	Forecast
<p>Existing Home Sales posted 5.18 million seasonally adjusted annualized units in September – a 5.5% increase from August’s resales pace and 1.4% ahead of the pace registered in September 2007. Home prices continued to retreat, with the national median price of an existing home at \$191,600 in September. Housing inventory declined to a 9.9 months supply at the current sales pace.</p>	Sept 08 5,180 Aug 08 4,910 Sept 07 5,110		Modest gains in months ahead.
<p>New Home Sales rose 2.7% in September to 464,000 seasonally adjusted annualized units. The pace is still 33.1% off that posted in September of 2007. The inventory of new homes available for sale at the end of the month declined to 394,000 – a 10.4 months supply at the current sales pace.</p>	Sept 08 464 Aug 08 452 Sept 07 694		New homes are a difficult sell when existing homes are cheaper
<p>Housing Starts posted a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 817,000 units – a 6.3% decline from August’s level and 31.1% off the level registered in September of 2007. Single-family housing starts were down 12.0% from the previous month, but multifamily starts rose 5.8% from August. Housing permits, generally a reliable indicator for future starts declined 8.3% from August to 786,000 – 38.4% off the level posted in September 2007.</p>	May 08 817 Apr 08 872 May 07 1,185		Foreclosure inventory keeps builders at bay
<p>Housing Affordability improved in September. NAR’s housing affordability index stood at 135.2 for September – up from August’s revised reading of 123.3 and a third consecutive monthly increase. The rise in affordability was due to a decline in the national median price for an existing home, a decrease in qualifying income, and lower interest rates.</p>	Sept 08 135.2 Aug 08 123.2 Sept 07 115.8		It may be hard to repeat the good gains in affordability from the prior year
<p>Mortgage Rates The 30-year fixed mortgage rate rose to 6.20% in October, after dropping in September. Gaps continue to widen between mortgage bond yields from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac as compared to the US treasuries and was one of the main reasons for the driving up of rates. Still, compared to a year ago, mortgage rates are lower.</p>	Oct 08 6.20% Sept 08 6.04% Oct 07 6.38%		Depends on how Fannie and Freddie are pushed to get the rates down
<p>Employment The economy continued to lose jobs in October as 240,000 non-farm payrolls were cut. Job losses in both September and August were revised upward – significantly. The nation’s unemployment rate also rose significantly – to a 14-year high of 6.5%. Job gains in sectors including government, health care and accounting/bookkeeping were not enough to offset the major losses in construction, retail, securities firms and auto</p>	Oct 08 -62 Sept 08 -62 12-month total -1,138 thousand		Job losses will continue for six more months
<p>Economic Growth The U.S. economy contracted in the third quarter of 2008, as real gross domestic product (GDP) decreased at an annual rate of 0.3%. This is the first estimate of third quarter economic growth based on incomplete data. Among the major components contributing to the negative GDP figure were sharp declines in personal consumption expenditures and slower growth in exports.</p>	2008:III -0.3% 2008:II 2.8% 2007:III 4.8%		The right stimulus package needs to be structured to get the economy back on track

Notes: All rate are seasonally adjusted. New home sales, existing home sales, and housing starts are shown in thousands. Employment growth is shown as month-to-month change in thousands. Inflation is shown as the month-to-month change in the Consumer Price Index. Sources: NAR, Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Freddie Mac, and the Mortgage Bankers Association