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'Sixes and sevens' sudoku

To solve a sudoku puzzle, you only need logic and patience. No math is required. Simply make sure that each 3x3 square region has a number 1 through 9 with only one occurrence of each number. Each column and row of the large grid must have only one instance of the numbers 1 through 9.

Here's a tip for playing. We call the 3x3 squares "regions." With a highlighter, color in all the rows and columns in the large grid that have a 6 in them. We chose 6 because there are several of them in the puzzle.

	5	6	1			7	8	
		2	6				5	4
						7	5	
2			7	6				3
8	6							
4	8			2	1			
	7	3		1	2	6		

Now observe. In the lower left region, what is the only possible location for the 6? This technique is called scanning, and you usually do it with your eyes. The difficulty rating on this puzzle is easy.

8	9	2	1	6	4	3	7	5
7	3	1	2	9	5	6	8	4
6	4	4	3	7	8	1	2	9
1	2	4	6	5	3	7	9	8
3	6	8	6	4	5	1	2	
5	4	4	1	8	2	1	6	3
6	1	3	5	2	6	8	4	7
4	6	7	8	7	9	5	4	
2	5	6	1	3	4	7	8	2

THE BUZZ Today's Real Estate News

Looking For A Simple, Inexpensive Upgrade To Give Your Property A Selling Edge? —Try Some Lovely Landscaping!



It doesn't matter whether you are planning to sell this year or five years from now, beautiful landscaping will give you very high returns on your investment now and later. And, with landscaping, the value usually increases with time and a little TLC.

For return on investment, landscaping rivals kitchen and bathroom remodeling, experts say, but a simple landscape upgrade can be done for much less than either of those interior upgrades.

According to Realtor Magazine, a minor kitchen remodel averages about \$15,000 and returns than 98 percent of the cost. Landscaping done well can return 100 percent to 200 percent of an investment and can be accomplished for an average of \$5,000, according to Money Magazine.

Sources differ on the value beautiful landscaping adds to a home. However, estimates range from a 10 percent to 20 percent increase in value. This Old House magazine (April 2003) puts the value at 20 percent. Smart Money magazine (March 2003) reports that if you spend 5 percent of the value of your home on landscaping, you increase the value by 15 percent.

Experts generally agree that landscaping should be modest. Complicated garden designs and vegetation that requires a lot of tending won't increase most home values. Of course, landscaping alone won't help sell a home in poor condition, but it will lift a home's profile among similar proper-

ties. Don't confuse landscaping with simple exterior curb appeal. Nearly any property can be made more appealing by keeping the lawns trimmed and mowed, removing lawn ornaments, and judiciously placing flowers. Landscaping involves more permanent elements, such as ornamental and shade trees, flower beds, and water features.

If you decide to improve your home's landscaping, consider getting professional advice from a landscape architect or designer. Even if you do the actual installation yourself, getting professional advice can prevent some common landscaping errors that actually decrease the value of your home.

One typical error is planting pine trees too close to the home. The trees may look nice when they are small, but 20 years later an enormous pine tree can dwarf a home. Planting the right trees can make or break your landscape.

What's New In Northern Colorado Real Estate...



Selling Your Home In An Uncertain Market

According to the Colorado Association of Realtors, Fort Collins is a place where many new residents have moved to escape big city blues, only to see the community grow during the real estate boom. Now with financing harder to get for a mortgage, Fort Collins sales pace has slowed, sending the market's home values lower, which are forecast to remain that way over 2009, deflating 7.1%

"Selling a home in a declining market starts with a proper attitude and finding the right Realtor who is optimistic and knows the right sales techniques in this tough market", according to Richard Daskam. "Even though most people and economists are down on the housing market (feel it is depressed, that the economic recovery isn't going to happen in the next few months, and consumer confidence is down), it doesn't mean that you can't sell your home".

The truth of the matter is many people will sell their homes between now and this summer. "While many sellers and real estate agents take a reactive approach to the market conditions, those sellers who take a more proactive and realistic approach to the market will be the ones who sell their homes" First, be honest about appraising the condition of your home.

The key to successful selling in a declining market is pricing your home at today's

market value, having your home in tip-top condition and being able to work with a prospective buyer on financing needs and terms. Don't let your ego or pride get in the way when determining a price for your home. Put yourself in the buyer's shoes and walk across the street. Curb appeal to a new buyer is a very important and is many-times overlooked.

Secondly, take a leisurely walk through your home jotting down the little things you might do to spruce it up. New carpeting, a fresh coat of paint, new light fixtures, mirrors, etc., are items that will give your home more emotional appeal and does not cost too much. Put away the clutter throughout the home. Rooms free of clutter will appear bigger and the new buyer can visually "move into" your home much easier. Remember new buyers are not buying your furniture.

Finally, be patient. The real estate market has changed considerably since the last run-up where homes sold in hours or days. We are now experiencing a more "normal market" where homes take 90-120 days to sell. Inventories are at an all-time high right now. Bank foreclosures are all around you and many buyers will have difficulty qualifying for a new loan. The National Association of Realtors said distressed sales—foreclosures and short

sales—accounted for 35 to 40 percent of transaction in the third quarter of 2008, pulling down the national median existing single-family home price to \$220,500. A year ago, when there were significantly fewer distressed transaction, the median price was \$220,300.

Lenders also have very strict guidelines now and consumer confidence is very low. Allowing for a normal marketing period will do a lot to alleviate your impatience when you have few showings or your home or a lack of offers to review. Properties need ample time to be exposed to the public and finding the right buyer requires a good understanding of the market as well as sales values.

Lawrence Yun, NAR chief economist, said there was understandable hesitation by some home buyers. "Given so much stimulus package discussion in January, some would-be buyers simply sat out for clarity and certainty on the nature of housing stimulus. NAR estimates the impact of the stimulus package and lower interest rates on the housing market to be about 900,000 additional home sales in 2009 compared to conditions before the stimulus package. Inventory is expected to fall below an 8-month supply by year's end, which would be consistent with home price stabilization.



Mary M. Rhoades
 CRS, GRI, Broker



Hello, and welcome to the spring issue of my newsletter, "THE BUZZ". It's my way of sharing with you pertinent information about today's real estate topics that affect you and our community.

Heading into summer, many of you are thinking about your family vacation, the new vegetable garden or perhaps planning a move. **If your future plans include selling your home, call me to help you prepare your home for sale with tips on curb appeal, staging, showing and updating your home for selling success.** Serving you would be my pleasure!

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Top Five Myths About Loan Modification

By Ralph Roberts, CRS, GRI—Ralph Roberts Realty

Ralph R. Roberts, consumer advocate and spokesperson for Federal Loan Modification Law Center, released a list dispelling the top five myths about loan modification. It is intended to better educate homeowners facing the prospect of losing their home in foreclosure and demystifies the most common misconceptions surrounding the loan modification process.

Myth #1: My bank wants me out of my house. My bank wants my home. Banks and other lending institutions do not want to foreclose. They earn more money if you can make your payments. When they foreclose, they not only lose your monthly payments, but they also have the expense of foreclosing (attorney fees), rehabbing the home, and then selling it (agent commissions). In today's market, there's a good chance they'll have to sell the home at a loss. This is all good news for you—it means the bank is highly motivated to make a deal with you.

Myth #2: My credit score is bad so I won't qualify. Unlike the option of refinancing out of trouble, which requires you to apply for a new loan, loan modification simply adjusts the terms and perhaps reduces the balance of a loan you already have. Your credit score is much less of a factor in determining whether you qualify for a loan modification. In addition, a successful loan modification can usually improve your credit score over time, especially if it prevents you from ending up in foreclosure or bankruptcy.

Myth #3: I am not late on my mortgage payments so I won't qualify. I have to miss a payment to be eligible. Early on, this was true. In fact, some early eligibility requirements stated that you had to be 61 days delinquent in order to qualify (missed two full payments). The truth is that the eligibility requirements are constantly changing and differ among lenders. Many lenders are now working out loan modifications with borrowers who are up to date on their payments. It's difficult to determine whether you qualify until you actually discuss your situation with the lender or with an attorney who is knowledgeable and experienced in loan modification.

Myth #4: I would be better off walking away or declaring bankruptcy than modifying my loan. Walking away from the home and filing for bankruptcy are certainly two options, but they are rarely the best options when you are facing foreclosure. If you simply walk away, the lender is unlikely to pursue legal action against you, but in some jurisdictions, the lender can pursue a deficiency judgment against you to collect the difference between what the lender receives for your home at auction and what you currently own on the balance of the mortgage. Filing for bankruptcy may be better than just walking away, but it can leave a blemish on your credit history that makes it difficult to borrow money in the future. A successful loan modification is almost always a more prudent choice.

Myth #5: It's too late. I have already received a foreclosure notice. As long as you still reside in the home—that is, you didn't voluntarily abandon it, and the home hasn't been sold at a foreclosure auction, you may still have time to work out a loan modification with your lender. The sooner you take action, the more options you have available and the more time you have to pursue the best option, but you can still negotiate late into the process. By contacting the lender or, better yet, having your attorney contact the lender on your behalf, you demonstrate a good faith effort to work out a solution and can often buy yourself extra time to negotiate a loan modification.

One In Seven Paying More Than 50 Percent For Housing

According to new numbers released by the U.S. Census Bureau, about 15 percent of mortgage holders are now spending half their incomes or more on housing costs.

The bureau said in 2007 about 7.5 million families were spending half their incomes on mortgages, compared to 7.1 million in 2006. The government considers anyone spending 30 percent or more of their income on housing to be "financially burdened". About 38 percent of mortgage holders fit in the category.

Company Insures Against Price Decline

An insurance company has begun a program that underwrites any drop in home prices between the time purchasers buy a home and the time they sell it. Equity Lock Financial says, for instance, that if a customer purchases a home for \$300,000 and the market declines five percent, it will pay the buyer \$15,000 at the time they sell.

While the plans are currently available through builders and developers, Equity Lock anticipates offering them directly to consumers in the coming months. For more information, see: www.equitylockfinancial.com

Fort Collins, Colorado Ranked among the Top 21 places to retire in the United States

The recently launched site, www.bestboomertowns.com, selected the top towns and cities based on crime rates, home prices, university access, airport convenience, small-town charm, hospital quality, weather and cultural activities.

Provided by Northern Colorado Business Report, February 2009

OK, Exactly How Many Homes Are There in the U.S.?

If you're wondering just how many homes there are in the United States, the Census Bureau has the answer:

There were 128.2 million in 2007, an increase from 124.4 million the last time a count was taken in 2005. The current population of the United States is about 305 million.

The Bureau said the number of occupied homes went from 108.9 million in 2005 to 110.7 million in 2007.

Other 2007 data showed:

- Median monthly housing costs were \$927 for owners and \$755 for renters.
- Median home value in 2007 was \$191,471 and the median monthly payment was \$852.

Ask An Expert

By Mary M. Rhoades, CRS, GRI



Question:

I'm a military veteran and having a difficult time making my high mortgage payments. Is there any special help available for me?

Answer:

Indeed there is. Veterans of Iraq and other military service can take advantage of recent changes that make the VA's loan guarantee program more flexible for borrowers. The VA Streamline Refinance program allows loans of up to 100 percent of the value of a home. Maximum loan amounts vary from one part of the country to another. Before these increased maximums, VA loans were capped at \$144,000.

The changes are specifically designed to assist veterans with subprime mortgages so they can refinance into a safer, more affordable VA loan.

During wartime, an active-duty member of the military needs only 90 days of service to qualify for the program. The requirement for a reservist or National Guard member is six years, unless the member is called to active duty, in which case the 90-day requirement applies.

Jim Brown, CEO of Veteran Mortgage in Everett, Washington, says many reservists don't know that they qualify.

The VA charges an upfront funding fee, but the fee is waived for veterans who have a 10 percent disability or more. Borrowers must have a stable income and reasonable credit history, though guidelines are generous and flexible, according to Brown.

Experts at Bankrate.com point out one advantage over FHA and other loans. The VA does not require mortgage insurance on loans that exceed 80 percent of the home's value. Not all mortgage brokers and lenders can offer Veterans Affairs loans, but many do.

Area Homes Retain Value

By Shelley Widhalm, Loveland Reporter-Herald

Homes in Loveland and Fort Collins resold at the same value this year as they did a year ago, while the national average fell 11.6 percent. The comparison is for January 2008 to January 2009, as reported by First American CoreLogic, a Santa Anna, California-based provider of real estate and property data.

Loveland and Fort Collins did not experience double-digit increases in housing prices like in California, Florida, Nevada and Arizona, which are experiencing an overinflated market with a high foreclosure rate. The Houston and Denver markets, which include Loveland and Fort Collins, were predicted to be the first two markets to pick up in value.

"Our prices didn't spike as much as in some areas. We didn't have as much to come down to meet the median price," said Kurt Albers, President of the Loveland-Berthoud Association of Realtors. According to CoreLogic, Denver saw nearly a 1 per-



Many nutritional experts assert that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It provides early energy and satisfies the hunger that is built up during the nighttime sleep hours.

Throughout the ages, breakfast has been the foundation of tradition in the military, whether cooked over a campfire or in a mess hall. Armies are said to

"travel on their stomachs."

A simple breakfast casserole can be a meal in itself or the center of a larger morning feast. It furnishes an abundance of protein, dairy products and cereal needs in the form of bread.

The foundation of this casserole is eggs, milk and cheese, but it can be enhanced by any other ingredient that might be included in an omelet.

Simple Breakfast Casserole

4 slices of bread, crusts trimmed

3 large eggs

18-ounce package of shredded sharp cheddar cheese or other favorite cheese

(Gouda or Edam make this dish elegantly richer)

1 cup milk

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon pepper

Optional ingredients can be bacon, peppers, onions, mushrooms, ham, sausage, tomatoes or bacon bits.

Whisk eggs, milk, salt, pepper and any other optional ingredients together in a large mixing bowl. Trim the bread of crusts. Pour the mixture into a large casserole dish. Float the bread on the liquid and cover it with the shredded cheese. Bake at 350 degrees until top of casserole starts to turn brown and mixture begins to firm. Serves four.

The casserole can be prepared ahead and reheated in the microwave. It is great the second or third day.

cent increase in housing prices from January 2008 to January 2009 and Loveland and Fort Collins saw an increase of 0.07 percent. "The prices will continually go up until they reach a level where they just pack out. Everything has to come back to a realistic market," Albers said.

"I've seen homes just go on the market and if they're in the right location, have the right value and are in excellent condition, they will be under contract within 14 to 21 days. In the economic downturn, the average market time for homes in Loveland and Fort Collins has been 120 days.

This past month, however, real estate agents are beginning to see more activity at their offices. Many are busy again and working weekends in time for the peak season, which lasts from April 1 to the end of September, when weather is warmer and before school starts in the fall.

It's the season. It's the interest rates, and it's the fact this area is not going down anymore."