

Buyers Market: Housing Sales Up, Prices Down

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The local real estate market started the new year much as it ended the old - home sales continued to increase as prices remained flat. Realtor®-assisted home sales in January hit a six-year high for the month, according to the High Country Multiple Listing Service, which tracks Realtor® sales in Ashe, Avery and Watauga counties. The median sold price, meanwhile, was the lowest recorded for any month in almost five years. There were 74 homes sold worth \$18.5 million last month, the busiest January since the first month of 2008 when 93 homes sold worth \$30.32 million. Sales for the month were up 16 percent compared to January 2013, and 35 percent compared to January 2012. Prices continued to be held down. The median sold price for January was \$173,500, a 20 percent decline from January 2013 (\$220,000). It was also the lowest median sold price for any month since March 2009 (\$164,000). There were 214 new listings added during the month, the second fewest since the end of 2012. At the start of February more than 2,300 homes were on the market in Ashe, Avery and Watauga counties. In recent years January has become the traditional low watermark for the year's Realtor® sales. The strong start to 2014 could indicate an especially busy year ahead.

"This is a great time to buy a home in the High Country," said Sam Taylor, 2014 President of the High Country Association of Realtors®. "Continued low interest rates, along with a high inventory of homes in the local market, have us optimistic that 2014 is going to be an even better year than 2013."

Local Realtors® are coming off their fourth straight year of growing sales. They sold 1,299 homes in 2013, a 3 percent increase from 2012, and a 28 percent increase from 2011. In that same time span the annual median sold price declined 10 percent, from \$212,000 in 2011 to \$190,000 in 2013.

Nationally, existing-home sales were up 9.1 percent, according to the National Association of Realtors® (NAR). That was the strongest performance since 2006. The national median price for the year was \$197,100, which was 11.5 percent above the 2012 median of \$176,800.

"Existing-home sales have risen nearly 20 percent since 2011, with job growth, record low mortgage interest rates and a large pent-up demand driving the market," said Lawrence Yun, NAR chief economist.

Mortgage rates remain steady. The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage was 4.23 percent during the first week of February, down from 4.32 percent the week before, according to Freddie Mac. It was the fifth consecutive week rates declined.