

Home buyers' blues

Report: Typical LI shopper has too small an income

BY MAURA MCDERMOTT
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The typical Long Islander earns less than half what it takes to buy a home here and the situation is worsening as home prices rise while wages stagnate, a new report shows.

In Nassau County, a buyer must earn about \$145,500 to afford a home selling for the median price of \$490,000, California-based real estate information company Attom Data Solutions found in a report released Thursday. That's more than twice the average yearly wage of \$60,489 in Nassau, the company reported.

In Suffolk County, home buyers require an income of nearly \$116,000 to make monthly payments on a house priced at the median \$365,000, Attom reported. That's roughly double Suffolk's average wage of about \$57,800.

The mismatch between wages and home prices "creates an untenable situation, particularly for millennials," said Mark Lesko, executive dean of the Wilbur F. Breslin Center for Real Estate Studies at Hofstra University. "Ultimately, that demographic is going to have to leave Long Island. You just can't afford to live here."

The typical Nassau resident would need to spend more than 67 percent of his or her paycheck to buy a median-priced home, and the typical Suffolk resident would need to set aside 56 percent, Attom's re-

BY THE NUMBERS

\$490,000

Nassau County median home price

\$60,489

Nassau County average annual wage

\$365,000

Suffolk County median home price

\$57,811

Suffolk County average annual wage

Source: Attom Data Solutions

port found.

By contrast, in the North Carolina county that includes Charlotte, it takes only 26 percent of typical wages to afford a home, less than the national average of 29 percent, Attom reported. In Charlotte, the median home price is \$215,000 and the average wage is about \$64,000.

Attom's analysis includes the monthly cost of a mortgage, property taxes, home insurance and mortgage insurance. It assumes home buyers can afford to spend no more than 28 percent of their income on housing.

In Attom's study of 446 counties across the country, Nassau ranked 24th least affordable, and Suffolk came in 44th. In 68 percent of the counties included in Attom's report, median home prices were not affordable for average wage earners.



Sean and Emily Marek Thursday in front of the 92-year-old Colonial in Huntington, which they bought

On Long Island, "it's the combination of home prices that have been rising faster than wages, consistently, during this economic recovery and housing recovery," said Daren Blomquist, senior vice president with Attom. "That's what's leaving home buyers, or prospective home buyers, in a tough position on Long Island."

The region's high property taxes, he said, "add fuel to the affordability fire."

The problem is likely to get worse if interest rates keep climbing, he added. This week, the average mortgage interest rate was 4.44 percent, up 0.3 percentage points from a year earlier, mortgage giant Freddie Mac reported.

"The saving grace in this market is low interest rates, and that appears to be going away, so that's not very good news for the future of affordability,"

Blomquist said.

What's more, annual property taxes often exceed \$10,000, and many median-priced homes require updates or repairs, said Amy Girimonti, an associate broker with Prime Properties Long Island in Huntington. Buyers "are feeling that they both need to work, at least starting off, in order to make the payments and afford the taxes," Girimonti said.

That was the case for Sean and Emily Marek, who bought their 92-year-old, three-bedroom Colonial in Huntington last year.

When they first started home shopping, their goal was to keep their monthly payments under one-third of their combined income, said Sean, 30, a physical therapist.

Despite their efforts, he said, "we're a little above that, and that's with two incomes."

With Long Island's high housing costs, "it all adds up very quickly," said Emily, 31, a kindergarten teacher. "You definitely need two incomes to make everything work." The report used weekly wage data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as figures from Freddie Mac and sales records to compare home prices with incomes for 446 counties across the country, assuming buyers made down payments of 3 percent and paid typical mortgage rates.

The county in the nation where home prices and incomes were most out of whack was Brooklyn, where the typical wage earner brings home about \$45,000 and the median sales price was \$740,000 in the first months of 2018, Attom reported.

Manhattan, Queens and San Francisco also ranked among the least affordable counties in

DA: Sex-traffic charges for five linked to gang

BY JOAN GRALLA
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Five suspected members and associates of the Bloods gang face multiple sex trafficking and other charges after their victims were “physically threatened” and “psychologically tortured” Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini said Thursday.

During a news conference in Central Islip, Sini outlined the 44-count indictment, describing a nightmarish scenario in which young and sometimes drug-addicted women were forced into prostitution to pay off their narcotic debts. “They were essentially sex slaves,” Sini said.

The four victims, in their 20s and early 30s, will be offered supportive services, Sini said.

Charged in the indictment were Shati Roy, 31, with a last known address in Shirley; Jeffrey Eason, aka “Fest,” 54, of Mastic Beach; Jamie E. Young, aka

“James,” 47, of Bellport; Kelvin Jackson, aka “Biggie,” 37, of Medford; and Avion Gordon, aka “G,” 30, also of Medford, prosecutors said. The five defendants remained in custody Thursday.

Roy was the leader of the operation and was charged with all 44 counts in the indictment, including multiple charges of sex trafficking, conspiracy, drug possession and promoting prostitution, prosecutors said. “He pimped out young girls suffering from drug addiction and issues at home,” Sini said. “He pimped them out throughout Suffolk County.”

Young, Eason and Jackson face multiple counts of sex trafficking, conspiracy and other offenses, prosecutors said, and Gordon is charged with multiple conspiracy counts.

Roy, Jackson, Eason and Gordon were arraigned Thursday in Suffolk criminal court in Central Islip. Bail was set at \$1 mil-

lion cash, or \$3 million bond, for the four. Young is set to be arraigned Friday, authorities said.

A maximum of 25 years in prison awaits Roy, Jackson, Eason and Young, if convicted of the top count of sex trafficking. Gordon faces a maximum of 4 years in prison if convicted.

The defendants supplied the women with illegal drugs and then ordered them to pay for the drugs, including cocaine and heroin, Sini said.

They also forced the women to pay for the hotel rooms used for prostitution, he said. The ring operated in commercial establishments and residences in Shirley, Medford, Coram, Ridge, Ronkonkoma and Holtsville, prosecutors said.

Roy and Young, described by Sini as “parole absconders,” were taken into custody in mid-December outside a Holtsville hotel while with the victims, authorities said. The women were

starving, dehydrated and sleep-deprived, Sini said.

Roy was represented by an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Suffolk County, which typically does not comment.

Young’s attorney said his client “will be vindicated.”

Jackson’s attorney, Sean M. Dixon, said, “Mr. Jackson is cloaked with the presumption of innocence and remains eager to mount his defense and vindicate himself.”

Gordon’s attorney was not immediately available. Eason’s attorney could not be reached.

Sini said the case is among first significant results of an initiative launched last year to combat sex trafficking. “If you’re engaging in sex trafficking,” he said, “we are going to find you.”

However, “we understand there are a host of reasons that victims can find themselves prostituting themselves,” he said. “We’re here to protect victims.”

JUDGE HELD ON BURGLARY CHARGE

BY ZACHARY R. DOWDY
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A Suffolk District Court judge was arrested Thursday and charged with burglary, after Suffolk police said he entered a neighbor’s home in East Islip without permission.

Robert Cicale, 49, of Donna Place, is scheduled to be arraigned Friday in the same kind of court where he presides, police said. He was arrested at about 9 a.m. after he entered a neighbor’s home on Donna Place and then ran away after realizing someone was inside the residence, police said.

He is charged with second-degree burglary and was being held overnight at the Third Precinct before arraignment in First District Court



Robert Cicale, a Suffolk District Court judge, was charged.

in Central Islip.

It was unclear Thursday evening whether he had an attorney.

Acting Police Commissioner Stuart Cameron said a 23-year-old female was at the home alone when she heard a noise and saw a man in the house.

When police responded to her 911 call, they found a man outside who matched the description she gave and who later was identified as Cicale, Cameron said.

Police found female undergarments in Cicale’s possession, but it was unclear whether the underwear was stolen Thursday, Cameron said.

“He was found with . . . female undergarments. We don’t know if these were the proceeds from the burglary today or a previous break-in,” Cameron said in an interview Thursday.

It was unclear whether the judge knew the woman at the house, he said.

Cicale was elected in 2015 on the Republican, Conservative, Green, Independence and Reform party lines. He also served as Islip Town attorney and worked for the Legal Aid

Society, which represents indigent defendants.

A spokesman for the state Office of Court Administration, Lucian Chalfen, said in an email: “We will be addressing the judge’s status in the morning. He will be arraigned by a Nassau County district court judge who will be sitting in Central Islip.”

Chris Brocato, president of the Suffolk County Criminal Bar Association, said, “He has a reputation not only as a good judge but as a good human being, too.”

He said the judge was “universally loved” by prosecutors and defense attorneys, adding “This is a very nice individual, a very compassionate individual.”

“When you knew you had to go to D-52 [his courtroom], you knew you were going to be treated fairly,” Brocato said.



BARRY SLOAN

last year.

the nation, with typical wage earners needing to spend 85 percent or more of their income to afford a median-priced home.

On Long Island the gap between home values and wages is widening, with housing prices rising by 7 percent over the past year while wages remained flat in Suffolk and ticked up by 1 percent in Nassau, Attom reported.

Many home buyers are couples who must both work full time to pay their mortgage and property taxes, said Jamie Gorman, a real estate agent with Plainview-based Charles Rutenberg Realty.

High home prices and taxes are “putting a lot of pressure on people,” Gorman said. “If their budget is based on two salaries, then there’s going to be no flexibility on that . . . they have to keep their jobs, or they need to settle for less.”

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