

WOOD ACRES!

A Real Estate Letter from Matthew Maury of Stuart and Maury Realtors

October, 2008

Dear Wood Acres Area Resident,

We can go two ways with this. We can focus on all the problems that surround the real estate market. And there **are** lots of problems. Almost cruelly, interest rates have risen in the last few weeks, the dramatic drop in personal wealth resulting from a collapsing stock market and a huge drop in consumer's confidence in the future are all conspiring to slow sales and real estate activity. On the other hand, your community of Wood Acres had four homes sell in the last month and the market in Bethesda has outperformed most areas of the country, even during the extraordinary events of the last month or so. I declared in the last newsletter that we **would** have a market and I stand by that. I think the recent sales in Wood Acres bear out this position. There are lots of buyers and sellers on the sidelines right now. That's understandable, the news of the day can be pretty horrifying and if there is one thing I have learned, it is that buyers make major life decisions on housing when they feel comfortable, secure and confident. The present situation does not provide this comfort level. However, a contrarian view would suggest that buying a house in 2005, *when the whole world was wrestling you in the front yard*, in hindsight, wasn't necessarily the most brilliant financial decision either. The point is that we don't know. Yes, interest rates are up a bit, but they are still in the upper six percent range, a ton lower than during many markets of the last 15 years. Seller pricing has given ground as well, there are bona fide opportunities out there. The "slingshot" effect of all these potential buyers and sellers sitting on the sidelines is something to watch. Many people have put life plans and aspirations on hold. What happens when they all re-enter the market place, as inevitably they will? Competition for the best buyers and the best houses will once again be commonplace.



Homeowners and agents cannot control the macro-economic environment. Whatever happens in the stock market, the world of politics, and the once great financial institutions of this country are not things we are going to be able to control. So let's focus on what we **can** do to better position ourselves for the future. I want to talk about how to insulate yourself as a homeowner from down times and be ready to soar in the inevitable good times which will come.

Your house is many things. It's your home, a sanctuary from the troubles of the world outside. It's a place of lasting memories. Decades from now, your children will fondly remember the home you are in now, they will drive their kids or grandkids by that home and say, "I used to live right there. There used to be a huge oak tree in the front yard." Your home transcends brick and mortar. It's a place where you can live the way you

want to live. I get all that. It's the way it is supposed to be and very few places match Wood Acres for the ambient sense of "home."

However, it's important to recognize that your home is also an investment, perhaps the biggest one you will ever make. Protecting that investment is critical. You can't make interest rates go down or the stock market go up, but you **can** do everything in your power to make your home as valuable as possible. Some of this takes money, but some aspects of protecting value involve elbow grease, creative effort and an intense pride of ownership. I don't claim to have all the answers on how this is achieved, but I have shown over 15,000 houses in my career over the past 29 years. You learn something about how people react, where their hot buttons are, and the elements that make someone say, "I like this house."

Let's start outside. One man's finely manicured grounds, meticulous defined planting areas and perfect lush green grass is another man's environmental nightmare. I take care of my own lawn and love working out there. Because of the dog, we try really hard not to use chemicals and when we do, they are the most environmentally friendly we can find to get the job done. Having said all that, when I pull up with a buyer to a house, the first impression can be a lasting one. Does it look exceptionally well cared for? Landscaping is a part of this equation. Foundation plantings should never rise above the bottom of windows on the front of a house. I know some people like the privacy, if so, I would suggest what are called "soft-lites" which are thin shades that let in the sun but cannot be seen through. Privacy should not be achieved on the front of the house through the use of bushes. Police departments will tell you that an overgrown appearance shields neighbors from noticing suspicious activity. You are safer with the bushes brought down. They should be well-trimmed and appropriately sized for their specimen.

Trees should be cut back and away from your roof and gutters. This is a common criticism on home inspections. I have attended over 1400 home inspections in my career and I can tell you that tree limbs are considered an enemy to your roof and gutters. Occasionally trim the tree branches up and away from the house. It will improve your sunlight in the home and protect the roof from damage in summer and winter storms. We all love the tall trees and canopy that makes Wood Acres so unique. Trees need to be nurtured, especially the grand older specimens in Wood Acres. Feed the trees from time to time and thin them out so that the fierce winds of both summer and winter blow through the tree rather than catching the foliage like a sail in the wind. You cannot replace a 150 ft. tree. I am a big fan of trimming up the branches to allow sunlight into your home. A skilled arborist can correctly balance sunlight, shade and the health of a tree.

What is the condition of your "hardscape?" This would be your front walk, your driveway, your front steps and front door landing. In general, Wood Acres was not built with concrete driveways like Springfield. Concrete lasts longer and requires less maintenance. Most of the driveways in Wood Acres are asphalt. It requires a degree of maintenance and the absence of such maintenance results in a lumpy appearance, a breaking apart of the surface and eventually, drainage related issues which sometimes result in wet basements. Is it possible to trip and fall on your front walk? It's amazing how often a walkway has become uneven, loose, and unstable. This is both unsafe and potentially fraught with liability issues. Last winter, there was a guy going around Bethesda to open houses who purposely tripped and fell coming up the walk and then sent letters stating that he was going to sue unless he was paid \$500 for his trouble. I couldn't even make this stuff up if I tried! Thus, you need to examine these surfaces. A number of homeowners have made fantastic and significant improvements to their walkways and it electrifies the notion.

Aluminum gutters and downspouts last a long time. Wood Acres is not a community that needs copper, it's expensive and frankly, an indulgence. However, gutters and downspouts don't work correctly if they are misaligned, rusting through, or not properly connected. Thoroughly examine your gutter and downspout system, it is your best line of defense against a wet basement. Put on a raincoat and go outside during a heavy rainstorm and observe how the system functions. Are there areas that overflow? Is water leaking through any gutters, are downspouts clogged up? When the water comes out the bottom of the downspout, does it clearly and effectively drain away from the home or is the water just dumped next to the house? Clean your gutters not only in the fall and in early December but also in May. These are simple, inexpensive aspects that can improve the value of your home and protect you from deteriorating surfaces and problems.

Paint would seem to be an obvious issue. Nothing deters a buyer like peeling paint. And when paint peels, it leaves wood unprotected and wood rot can take place, which can be expensive to repair. You would simply be astounded at how much a pair of real wood shutters cost these days. It's nasty. Real wood shutters need to be painted both front and back to protect them from rot and this needs to be done consistently. Not only will your house look better, the shutters will last longer. If you have vinyl shutters, your maintenance responsibilities will be less but it is still something to watch carefully. Brutal sunlight can warp and twist vinyl shutters, destroying their appearance and making the front of your home look just a bit "askew."

I'm a huge fan of classy coach lamps, mail slots, door knockers, address lettering etc. The front door is the gateway to your home. And a would be buyer will be standing at your front door while I'm fumbling with the key more often than not. They are making judgments and noticing everything. An appealing front door area invites a buyer to love the house. I'm a fan of full view front door storm doors. Some folks don't like a storm door but I think it's great on an open house in late October to have the front door open, letting in all that sunlight, but still have a door to keep out the weather, bugs etc. Some Wood Acres homes do not have a window on the front wall of the living room and with the door closed, the room can be dark. A full view storm door solves this issue. I had a buyer tell me once that when they bought their Wood Acres house they noticed the first day they moved in that they had never noticed how dark the living room was with the front door closed. I gave them a sheepish smile and said, "that's why your full-view storm door is so important." A great example of a terrific front door area can be found by checking out Chris and MaryAnn Lent's front door at 6105 Cromwell Dr. This home actually had a new portico built not too long ago and it's just gorgeous.

Recently, I have encountered a problem with many outside electrical wires in our community. There are several components to the electrical service in your home. The wires that come high up in the air to your house from the street, the thick wire that comes down the side of your house, the meter itself, another thick wire from the meter through your brick wall to the interior panel, and the electrical panel itself. The two thick wires above and below the meter are often losing the integrity of their covering. Years ago, the material used was an almost cloth-like material. Over time, this material delaminates in sunlight. It starts to separate and tear apart, leaving open the possibility of moisture entering the cable which can wick back down into your electrical panel and cause rusting in the panel. Water and electricity don't mix well and inspectors will often cite the outside wires attached to your home for replacement. Back in the '80's we often persuaded Pepco to pay for this replacement but they stopped providing that service years ago. Thus, you need to go outside and look carefully at your "service entry cables." If you have an updated electrical panel in the last 15 years or so, your cable will have a smooth plastic type covering. You are in good shape. However, older electrical systems may have cabling that is separating and starting to come apart. Check not only the long wire from the top of the house but also the short wire from the meter going into your brick. The long wire can cost

\$1000-\$1500 to replace, the short wire more like \$500. You can also end up getting into a philosophical discussion as to whether a new wire will result in a mis-match with your existing electrical panel. We have had circumstances in which the delaminating wire outside has resulted in a Catch-22 in which we had to replace the entire panel as part of a “heavy-up” solution to the problem. This obviously comes as a huge surprise to homeowners who have experienced absolutely no failure in their electrical system and think everything is just fine. If you are having a hard time judging the wire, call me up, I can come look at it. I will often tell homeowners selling their house, “these wires could be an issue on home inspection.” This problem is not unique to Wood Acres in any way, exterior entry cables are coming apart everywhere throughout the region.

Chimneys are a constant source of concern on home inspections. None of us climbs a ladder and checks out the condition of the top of the chimney. We don't get up there and look down the shaft to check condition. Many owners never use their chimney. There are all kinds of chimney elements that can cause problems in an inspection. The “crown” on top is made of concrete. When it separates slightly water can penetrate the cracks. In winter, the water freezes and opens the cracks wider. The same process can take place with the brick and mortar at the top of the chimney. When things start to deteriorate up there, the process can accelerate quickly. We often encounter concerns about the flue liners in a chimney, or their absence in some cases. I won't bore you with the ugly details of “orphaned hot water heaters” and high efficiency furnaces but I can tell you that a surprising number of issues arise related to chimneys, both inside and out. Have your chimney checked out by a professional from time to time. It can be hard to find a truly honest company. Years ago, my father lived in Westmoreland Hills and had a very well-known company look at his chimney. The technician went out to the truck and used to walkie-talkie to call the office. The tech didn't know my dad had followed him out to the truck. The tech says into the walkie-talkie “I think the liner is okay, what should I tell him?” Out of the hand-set booms the words, “hit him for a \$2,000 liner!” Of course, my father heard this, dismissed the company and I have spoken ill of them ever since. I can recount dozens of horror stories related to chimney repair. I believe I have found and use a truly honest company. Call me, I'll tell you who the good guy is and who the bad guys are too!

Let's talk about your roof. 21 years ago, I wrote a long piece in a Wood Acres newsletter about Wood Acres roofing. At the time I pointed out that the slate used in Wood Acres was expected to last between 50-60 years. We are past that point at this stage, with the oldest homes in the neighborhood now approaching 69 years old (hard as that might be to believe!). I think the inspectors are surprised that many original slate roofs are still in pretty good shape. The more whitish rings on the roof, and browning of the slates, the more likely an inspector will tell a prospective buyer to budget for replacement of the slate. These slate roofs are not lifetime slate, like the Vermont or Buckinghamman slate you might see in Spring Valley. Depending on sun exposure, a slate roof may be completely worn out or still going strong. It frustrates me when an inspector, mostly to cover his backside, talks about “life expectancy” for slate material and then tells a buyer, “it looks okay now, but probably will need to be replaced in two to five years.” Most buyers don't know squat about roofs and this potential expense scares them. I could get in the car right now and drive by 20 slate roofs in Wood Acres that were deemed “ready for replacement soon” and that pronouncement was made more than 10 years ago by an inspector. If you have an original slate roof, its care and maintenance is critical. Check for slipped slate, chipped slate, missing slate, clogged copper valleys etc. Again, honest roofers are hard to come by. I have confidence in a few people and I can help you.

The other predominant material used in Wood Acres roofing in the newer section of the community (built after World War II) was cement asbestos shingles. Even the word “asbestos” freaks out a certain segment of the buying public. I owned a house with this kind of roof on

Woodacres Dr. for many years and it is still there. Stuart & Maury manages that home for rent and the roof continues, at age 58, to perform perfectly. There are ill-informed inspectors out there who will tell the public that this material has a life expectancy of 40 years. This has been definitely proven to be wrong. Fletcher Roofing told me recently that they think this material may fairly last 70-90 years with care and maintenance. I have seen dozens of cement asbestos shingle roofs needlessly replaced over the years in Wood Acres. They weather poorly, don't always look that great, and are subject to problems if they are walked on by careless service providers like painters, cable guys, chimney people etc.

From a sales standpoint, it is critical that a cement asbestos shingle roof have no weaknesses. Nothing chipped or slipped or missing. Ridge lines need to be well sealed, as well as all vent stacks. When an inspector is looking at a Wood Acres cement asbestos shingle roof, if its integrity is stellar, the conversation will go much better than if it has deferred maintenance issues.

Asphalt shingle roofing has been the preferred replacement material in Wood Acres for several decades now. It's less expensive than slate and the textured aspects of asphalt shingle roofs can be quite attractive. It is almost always harder for a layman to ascertain the condition of such a roof however. Many homeowners are shocked to discover their roof is 24 years old and deemed "near the end of its useful life" by an inspector. The granules just erode over time. However, for what it's worth, a roof "at the end" can still last for many, many years before it actually starts to leak. This is of little comfort to a buyer however. Owners will say, "well, they aren't buying a brand new house." This is true, but few buyers are in a position to judge just how quickly they might get hit with a huge expense (\$4500-\$6500) for a new roof. This expense, or "potential" expense can come as a surprise at home inspection. It's worth having a professional examine your asphalt shingle roof from time to time for integrity and proper performance. "An ounce of prevention..."

Let's have a discussion about windows. 400 homes were built by Walker from 1940-1958. Eighteen of them had metal casement windows. Most of these have been replaced over the years, although some of these windows still exist. Issues of energy efficiency and operation are a common issue when these homes are sold, but I like to point out to buyers that the home has been there for *decades* and lots of people have comfortably lived in the home with these kinds of windows. However, with energy costs soaring, efficiency is a legitimate issue these days and metal casement windows can be a negative to the sales process.

The standard wood double hung windows found in the rest of Wood Acres is another thing however. Coupled with storm windows on the outside, I believe that these windows are not only attractive but also functional and worth retaining. The cost of replacing all the windows in a Wood Acres homes can run between \$400-\$700 a window. This cost can exceed, in some cases, \$18,000. Many Wood Acres owners have opted to replace their windows and love the results. New windows are easier to clean, go up and down consistently and hold their position, are more energy efficient and require less exterior painting and maintenance. These are all pluses. I have sold many of these homes and buyers are pleased to have newer windows, although sometimes the windows don't entirely match the classic, timeless architecture of the 40's and 50's. However, I have a hard time justifying the cost related to benefit of brand new window installation. I just don't feel like there's a dollar for dollar return on the investment when the home is eventually sold. Now, in the future, this may become more of an issue as the original windows get older and older. Certainly, there is a crying need for storm windows to improve energy efficiency, both for warmth and for civic mindedness. I just think it would be hard to save enough in heating/cooling costs to make up \$10,000-\$18,000. Not everything is about money and resale however. If new windows provide comfort and convenience to an owner, the expense can be tolerated, and the selection of the new

windows is harmonious to the original architecture, then go for it. You might find it interesting that up until last year, agents were able to call the utility companies to get the average utility bills for a piece of property so that potential buyers could accurately assess the cost of living in a home. Pepco and Washington Gas won't release that information anymore. It's a valuable piece of information when you go to sell your home, so keep good records. Additionally, there is a new law headed our way in 2009 that may require the seller of a property to provide such information.

Sincerely,

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P.S. This Wood Acres newsletter, past newsletters, a 2007 year end recap of sales activity in Wood Acres and a history of Wood Acres sales going back to 1980, can be accessed at my web site **www.matthewmaury.com**. Click on Wood Acres. You can also find similar data on the subdivision of Springfield.