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A METRO ATLANTA BUYER'S ROADMAP

THE FIRST-TIME HOMEBUYER GUIDE

FIVE STEPS. REAL NUMBERS. NO GUESSWORK.



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WELCOME

BEFORE YOU START SCROLLING LISTINGS

Most first-time buyers start with the fun part: browsing homes. This guide starts one step earlier, with the five things that actually determine whether your purchase goes smoothly: your numbers, your timeline, your must-haves, your offer strategy, and your closing.

How to use this guide: Read it once straight through (it's short on purpose), then come back to Chapters 2 and 3 when you're ready to talk numbers with a lender, and Chapter 5 the week before you move.

Why start looking now: First-time buyers make up just 21% of the market today, and the median first-time buyer is 40. Both are record highs. Buyers who delay from age 30 to 40 can miss out on roughly \$150,000 in home equity growth on a typical starter home. Starting your search now, even before you're ready to make an offer, puts you ahead. *Source: NAR 2025 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers.*

How I work with you: My job isn't to choose the house for you. It's to help you see the house clearly enough to make your own decision.

As your agent, I'll point out relevant facts I know or discover during the process, including potential concerns with the property that may deserve a closer look. If something requires expertise beyond my role — such as a structural, electrical, plumbing, or environmental issue — I'll recommend that we bring in the appropriate professional.

I'll also help you look beyond the cosmetics. A beautifully staged home can make a strong first impression, but the things that matter most may not be immediately obvious.

WHAT'S INSIDE

1

THE 5-STEP TIMELINE

What actually happens between "I want to buy a house" and getting your keys.

2

WHAT IT ACTUALLY COSTS

Beyond the down payment: every fee a first-time buyer should budget for.

3

YOUR LOAN, IN REAL NUMBERS

FHA, conventional, VA, and USDA side by side, plus a sample \$350,000 purchase worked out to the monthly payment.

4

ASSISTANCE & COMMON MISTAKES

Assistance you may qualify for, and the errors that cost buyers the most.

5

YOUR MOVE-IN CHECKLIST

So nothing falls through the cracks, from moving day through your first year in the home.

CHAPTER 1

THE 5-STEP TIMELINE

Every purchase is different, but almost all of them move through the same five stages. Knowing what's coming next is what keeps the process from feeling like it's happening *to* you.

1

GET PRE-APPROVED

A lender reviews your income, credit, and debts and tells you what you can actually borrow. This isn't the same as a "pre-qualification". Pre-approval carries real weight with sellers and should happen before you tour a single home.

2

DEFINE YOUR MUST-HAVES

Location, size, layout, commute, school zone, condition you're willing to take on. Separating "must-have" from "nice-to-have" now saves you from touring dozens of homes that were never going to work.

3

TOUR WITH A CRITICAL EYE

Photos hide a lot. A good tour looks past staging to structural condition, resale value, and the true cost of anything that needs work. The kitchen being pretty is the least of it.

4

MAKE A CONFIDENT OFFER

Price is only one part of an offer. Contingencies, closing timeline, and earnest money all affect how competitive and how safe your offer is.

5

CLOSE & GET YOUR KEYS

Inspection, appraisal, final walkthrough, and a stack of paperwork stand between an accepted offer and closing day. In Georgia, a licensed Georgia attorney must conduct the closing, so you'll sign everything in their presence, not with a title company or notary. A good agent keeps this stage boring — in a good way.

Buyer tip: Shop with at least two lenders before you choose one. Comparing rates and terms is one of the simplest ways to save money on your loan. Most purchases close within 6–8 weeks of finding a home, though this varies by market.

Source: NAR.

Not every home shows up on Zillow first. Erik searches directly through FMLS and Georgia MLS, the two listing databases that cover essentially every licensed listing in Metro Atlanta and across the state. Public sites often sync with a delay or show a filtered view; with full access, you see new listings, price changes, and status updates the moment they happen.

The market right now: In August 2026, Georgia MLS put the median sale price across its 12-county Atlanta region at \$400,000, down 1.7% from a year earlier, with active listings up 3% and new contracts down 29%. More choice means more time to compare homes, but being pre-approved still lets you move quickly when the right one appears. *Source: Georgia MLS (gaml.com), 12-County Region Market Statistics, August 2026.*

CHAPTER 1 · CONTINUED

HOME-TOUR SCORECARD

Print one for every home you tour. Scoring each the same way makes it much easier to compare homes a week later.

ADDRESS _____ ASKING PRICE _____ DATE TOURED _____

AREA	WHAT TO LOOK AT	SCORE 1–5	NOTES
My must-haves	Does it meet the must-haves from Step 2 without stretching your budget?	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Roof & gutters	Age and condition; ceiling stains below; water pooling or sagging.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Foundation & drainage	Cracks, sticking doors, damp smell, soil sloping toward the house.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
HVAC & water heater	Ask the age and last service date; look for rust and leaks.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Plumbing & electrical	Water pressure, slow drains, stains under sinks; working outlets.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Windows & doors	Fogged panes, drafts, soft or rotted wood, locks that work.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Kitchen & baths	Appliances you would have to replace; signs of past leaks.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Layout & light	Where your furniture goes, natural light, storage.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Neighborhood	Visit at rush hour and at night: noise, traffic, parking, commute.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
Flood zone & utilities	Check the address at msc.fema.gov ; ask about HOA dues and internet options.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	

1 = serious concern · 3 = fine · 5 = great. Circle one per row.

WHAT I LOVED

WHAT WORRIES ME

Before you make an offer: ask for the seller's disclosure, and use your due diligence period to have a licensed inspector look at anything you scored a 1 or 2. Ask about a termite (wood-destroying organism) report too.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IT ACTUALLY COSTS

The down payment gets all the attention, but it's rarely the only check you'll write. Here's what else to budget for, as a rough share of your home's purchase price.

COST	WHAT IT COVERS	TYPICAL RANGE
Earnest Money	A good-faith deposit shown with your offer, credited back toward your purchase at closing.	1–2%
Home Inspection	A licensed inspector's assessment of the home's condition before you're locked in.	\$300–\$600
Appraisal	Your lender's required, independent estimate of the home's value.	\$400–\$700
Loan Origination & Fees	Your lender's cost to process, underwrite, and fund the loan.	0.5–1%
Title Insurance & Search	Protects you and your lender against claims on the property's title.	0.5–1%
Prepaid Taxes & Insurance	Escrow account funding for property taxes and homeowners insurance.	Varies

Rule of thumb: Beyond your down payment, plan for roughly 2–5% of the purchase price in closing costs. Ask your lender for a Loan Estimate early. It itemizes every fee before you're committed to anything.

You don't need 20% down. The median down payment for first-time buyers is 10% (repeat buyers put down 23%). The idea that you need a fifth of the purchase price up front is one of the biggest myths in home buying. First-time buyers most often paid it from personal savings (59%), retirement or investment funds (26%), or a gift or loan from family or friends (22%); some used more than one. *Source: NAR 2025 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers.*

Watch for hidden HOA costs. HOA dues are billed separately from your mortgage. Nationally the median is \$135/month, but roughly 3 million U.S. households pay over \$500/month. The bigger risk is a **special assessment**: a one-time charge, sometimes tens of thousands of dollars, when an HOA's reserve fund hasn't kept up with major repairs. Before making an offer, ask for the resale certificate, the latest budget and reserve study, and a year of meeting minutes. They'll reveal pending assessments or fee increases. *Sources: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (consumerfinance.gov); U.S. Census Bureau.*

CHAPTER 2 · CONTINUED

YOUR CASH-TO-CLOSE WORKSHEET

Fill this in with a lender's numbers to see how much cash you need saved, and what the monthly payment looks like.

CASH TO CLOSE	TYPICAL RANGE	MY NUMBER
Down payment	3–20% of the price (see Chapter 3)	
Home inspection	\$300–\$600	
Appraisal	\$400–\$700	
Loan origination & fees	0.5–1% of the loan	
Title insurance & search	0.5–1% of the price	
Georgia intangible tax & recording	\$1.50 per \$500 borrowed, plus recording fees	
Closing attorney fee	Ask your attorney	
Prepaid taxes & insurance	Ask your lender	
Less: seller credits or assistance	Chapter 4	
Cash needed to close		
Plus: cash I want left after closing	Your safety cushion	
Total cash I need saved		

Earnest money is credited toward your purchase at closing, so it is part of these totals. Don't count it twice.

MONTHLY PAYMENT	HOW TO ESTIMATE	MY NUMBER
Principal & interest	From your lender's quote	
Mortgage insurance	From your Loan Estimate; none with 20% down	
Property taxes	Yearly tax ÷ 12 (near 1% of price)	
Homeowners insurance	Yearly premium ÷ 12	
HOA dues	Monthly amount, if any	
Estimated monthly payment		

Compare with the sample: the \$350,000 FHA purchase in Chapter 3 works out to \$23,668 in cash to close and about \$2,916 a month. Your lender must send a Loan Estimate within three business days of your application. Use it to replace these estimates with exact figures. *Source: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (consumerfinance.gov).*

CHAPTER 3

YOUR LOAN, IN REAL NUMBERS

The loan you choose shapes both the cash you need up front and your monthly payment. Here are the four you'll hear about most.

LOAN TYPES AT A GLANCE

LOAN	DOWN PAYMENT	MORTGAGE INSURANCE	OFTEN A FIT IF...
FHA	3.5% with a 580+ credit score	1.75% upfront (usually rolled into the loan) + 0.55%/yr for most low-down loans; stays for the life of the loan with under 10% down	Your credit is still building, or savings are smaller
Conventional	As little as 3% for first-time buyers; 620+ credit typical	PMI only under 20% down; you can request removal at 80% of the original value, and it ends automatically at 78%	You have solid credit and want mortgage insurance that goes away
VA	0%	No monthly mortgage insurance; a one-time funding fee (2.15% on first use with under 5% down), waived for veterans receiving VA disability compensation	You're an eligible veteran, service member, or surviving spouse
USDA	0%	1% upfront + 0.35%/yr	Your income is within limits and the home is in a USDA-eligible area, including some outlying communities around Metro Atlanta

Your credit score moves the numbers. Lenders price both your interest rate and your mortgage insurance by credit score, so even a modest improvement before you apply can lower your payment. Ask each lender to quote the same loan type so you can compare them side by side.

Not sure which fits? Many buyers qualify for more than one. Ask your lender to run your scenario both ways. The next page shows what that comparison looks like.

Loan limits for 2026. In Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Gwinnett, Clayton, Henry and the other counties around Atlanta, FHA loans are capped at \$718,750 for a single-family home. The conventional (conforming) limit is \$832,750. *Sources: HUD, FHA 2026 loan limits; FHFA, 2026 conforming loan limits.*

CHAPTER 3 · CONTINUED

A SAMPLE PURCHASE

One \$350,000 Metro Atlanta home, financed two ways, from the cash you'll need at closing to the full monthly payment.

	FHA, 3.5% DOWN	CONVENTIONAL, 5% DOWN
Down payment	\$12,250	\$17,500
Closing costs lender, attorney, title, Georgia taxes & prepaids	\$11,418	\$11,212
Cash needed to close	\$23,668	\$28,712
Loan amount includes \$5,911 upfront MIP	\$343,661	\$332,500
Principal & interest 30-year fixed at 7.0%	\$2,286	\$2,212
Mortgage insurance	\$155	~\$139 est. 0.5%/yr; varies with credit
Property taxes ~1% of price per year	\$292	\$292
Homeowners insurance ~\$2,200 per year	\$183	\$183
Estimated monthly payment	\$2,916	\$2,826

The trade-off: FHA gets you in the door with about \$5,000 less cash; conventional costs about \$90 less a month, and its mortgage insurance can come off once you reach 20% equity. Down payment assistance (Chapter 4) or seller-paid closing costs can shrink the cash-to-close line for either. Sellers can cover up to 6% of the price on FHA, or 3% on conventional with under 10% down.

Illustration only, not a loan offer. Assumes a 30-year fixed rate of 7.0% (Freddie Mac weekly average: 7.03% on Sept. 24, 2026); property taxes near 1% of price (Metro Atlanta counties run roughly 0.7–1.3%, before any homestead exemption); insurance near Georgia's ~\$2,100–\$2,400 average; HOA dues not included. Closing costs are itemized Metro Atlanta estimates: lender fees ~0.75% of the loan, appraisal \$600, closing attorney \$1,000, title ~0.5% of the loan, Georgia intangible recording tax (\$1.50 per \$500 borrowed), recording fees, a year of insurance, a 3-month tax and 2-month insurance escrow deposit, and 15 days of prepaid interest (the seller customarily pays Georgia's transfer tax). Loan terms per HUD (FHA), VA, USDA Rural Development, and Fannie Mae guidelines. Your lender's Loan Estimate will show your actual numbers.

CHAPTER 3 · CONTINUED

METRO ATLANTA MARKET SNAPSHOT

Where prices and competition stood in August 2026, so you know what to expect in the county where you're looking.

\$400,000

Median sale price
1.7% lower than a year ago

4,493

Homes sold in August
4.2% fewer than a year ago

22,897

Homes for sale
3.0% more than a year ago

-28.9%

New contracts
compared with last August

BY COUNTY, AUGUST 2026

COUNTY	MEDIAN PRICE	VS. LAST YEAR	HOMES SOLD	FOR SALE	MONTHS OF SUPPLY
Fulton	\$440,000	+3.5%	887	5,541	6.2
Cobb	\$425,000	-1.2%	679	2,753	4.1
Gwinnett	\$409,990	-2.0%	759	3,550	4.7
DeKalb	\$337,500	-7.3%	610	2,898	4.8
Henry	\$335,000	-1.5%	271	1,503	5.5
Clayton	\$235,000	-8.6%	177	959	5.4

How to read it: the median is the middle sale price: half of homes sold for more, half for less. Months of supply is how long the homes for sale would last at the current pace of sales: the lower it is, the more competition you should expect; the higher it is, the more room you may have to negotiate.

A county is not a neighborhood. Prices vary widely between neighborhoods, home types and price ranges inside every county. Use these numbers as a starting point, then ask for the recent sales in the specific area and price range you're considering.

Source: Georgia MLS (gaml.com), market statistics for the 12-county Atlanta region and for each county, August 2026; residential sales, compared with August 2025. Months of supply is calculated as homes for sale divided by August sales and is rounded; it is not a figure published by Georgia MLS. The 12-county region is Georgia MLS's own area definition and its median differs from broader Atlanta-metro figures.

CHAPTER 4

ASSISTANCE & COMMON MISTAKES

A little research here can save you real money — and a few honest mistakes are the ones I see most often.

PROGRAMS WORTH ASKING ABOUT

Georgia Dream Homeownership Program. A state program that pairs a 30-year fixed-rate loan with down payment assistance: up to 5% of the price (maximum \$10,000), or up to 6% (maximum \$12,500) for protectors, educators, nurses and families with a disabled member. It is a 0% loan with no monthly payment, due when you sell, refinance or move out. You generally need to be a first-time buyer (or not have owned a home in three years), have a 640 middle credit score, complete homebuyer education, and put in at least \$1,000 of your own money. In Metro Atlanta the limits are a \$625,000 price and \$137,555 income (1–2 people) or \$158,188 (3+). Ask your lender if you qualify. *Source: Georgia Department of Community Affairs, effective July 2026.*

County & City Programs. Several Metro Atlanta counties and cities run their own down payment or closing cost assistance for buyers purchasing within their limits.

Lender-Specific Grants. Many lenders offer their own first-time buyer grants or reduced-fee programs. It's always worth asking directly.

Free Homebuyer Counseling. A HUD-certified housing counselor can help you build a budget, clear financial roadblocks, and prepare for what homeownership actually costs — at no cost to you. Find one through HUD.gov or ask me for a referral.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

-  **Shopping before getting pre-approved.**
You risk falling for a home outside your real budget.
-  **Making a big purchase before closing.**
A new car or credit card can change your approval.
-  **Skipping the inspection.**
Even in a competitive market, this protects you from costly surprises.
-  **Getting quotes from just one lender.**
NAR recommends comparing at least two. Rates and terms vary more than most buyers expect.
-  **Borrowing the maximum you're approved for.**
Your approval amount isn't a budget. Leave room for taxes, insurance, and upkeep.
-  **Ignoring resale value.**
Your first home probably isn't your last — buy with that in mind.
-  **Skimming past HOA fees even when they're disclosed.**
They're usually right there in the listing or contract, but it's easy to glance at the dollar amount and move on. Read the actual rules before you sign, so you know exactly what you're agreeing to and not only what it costs.

A newer Georgia property tax rule. Starting in 2027, every Georgia county, city and school district must limit how fast the taxable value of a homesteaded home can rise each year to the rate of inflation, measured from 2026 values. The local opt-outs some Metro Atlanta governments used no longer apply. File for your homestead exemption after you buy; it doesn't lower today's bill, it limits how quickly your taxable value can climb. *Sources: Georgia SB 33 (2026); Georgia Department of Revenue.*

CHAPTER 4 · CONTINUED

BEFORE YOU SIGN

One of the biggest mistakes buyers can make is getting so caught up in how a home looks that they rush through the paperwork.

A beautiful kitchen, spacious backyard, or perfect paint color can create excitement—but the contract is what establishes the terms of your purchase.

BEFORE SIGNING, MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE AGREEING TO, INCLUDING:

- ☐ **Contingencies** — what must happen for the transaction to move forward or allow you to terminate under the contract
- ☐ **Due diligence and inspection provisions** — what opportunities you have to investigate the property
- ☐ **Financing terms** — requirements and deadlines related to your loan
- ☐ **Closing dates and deadlines** — when important actions must occur
- ☐ **Earnest money** — how it is handled under the agreement
- ☐ **Seller concessions or other negotiated terms**
- ☐ **Your obligations** — what you're responsible for completing or providing

My goal: As your agent, my mission is to help you understand the real-estate terms and transaction process, point out important provisions and deadlines, and make sure you have an opportunity to ask questions.

DON'T LET THE EXCITEMENT OF FINDING YOUR DREAM HOME CAUSE YOU TO SKIM THE AGREEMENT THAT GOVERNS THE PURCHASE.

CHAPTER 5

YOUR MOVE-IN CHECKLIST

Closing day is a milestone, not the finish line. Here's what to knock out before you move, in your first two weeks, and over your first year in the home.

BEFORE YOU MOVE IN

- ☐ Transfer or set up utilities: electric, gas, water, internet
- ☐ Set up trash and recycling, often billed through your city or county
- ☐ Confirm your homeowners insurance policy is active
- ☐ Schedule movers or reserve a truck
- ☐ Forward your mail with USPS
- ☐ Store your closing documents somewhere safe. You'll want them at tax time and when you sell

YOUR FIRST YEAR

- ☐ File for Georgia's homestead exemption with your county tax office (due April 1 for any home you owned and lived in on January 1)
- ☐ Ignore mailers charging a big fee for a "copy of your deed"; the county Clerk of Superior Court provides copies for a small fee

YOUR FIRST TWO WEEKS

- ☐ Change the locks and garage codes
- ☐ Update your address: bank, employer, DMV, voter registration
- ☐ Locate the main water shutoff and breaker panel
- ☐ Test smoke and carbon monoxide detectors
- ☐ Replace the HVAC filter and note the system's age
- ☐ Confirm your first mortgage payment date and set up autopay
- ☐ Introduce yourself to the neighbors
- ☐ Set aside about 1% of the home's value per year for maintenance and repairs
- ☐ Review your annual escrow statement, since taxes and insurance can change your payment
- ☐ On a conventional loan, track your equity so you can request PMI removal at 20%

READY TO TALK THROUGH YOUR OWN TIMELINE?

Every buyer's situation is different. Book a free, no-pressure consultation and let's map out what these five steps look like for you.



I got into real estate out of a love for home improvement and decor. I like houses in general, and that passion turned into a career. I've spent the last two years showing buyers new homes. With me, expect a simple, straightforward process.

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Statistics cited in this guide are drawn from the National Association of REALTORS® 2025 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers and NAR consumer guides ([nar.realtor](https://www.nar.realtor)); market figures from Georgia MLS; loan terms and limits from HUD, FHFA, VA, USDA Rural Development, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac; Georgia Dream terms from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs; closing-cost rules from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; Georgia homestead and property tax rules from georgia.gov and the Georgia Department of Revenue. This guide is for general information only and isn't financial, legal, or tax advice. Confirm program eligibility and current terms with a lender or qualified professional. Cover photo: Will Haddock / Unsplash.