

FOR FIRST-TIME HOMEBUYERS

THE

# KEY READY

SYSTEM™

A CLEAR PATH TO BUYING  
YOUR FIRST HOME

CARLI PLUMMER

YOUR FIRST-TIME HOMEBUYER SPECIALIST

THE KEY TEAM



*For First-Time Homebuyers*

# **THE KEY READY SYSTEM™**

**Carli Plummer**

ColoradoHomesbyCarli•KeyTeamReal Estate

*A Step-by-Step Guide to Preparing for Homeownership and  
Buying with Confidence*

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*To every buyer who trusted me before I had the words to explain what I  
instinctively knew how to do.  
You are why this book exists.*

*And to the buyers still waiting.  
This one is for you.*

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*All tools, checklists, and resources: [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

# BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you have been putting this off because you don't feel ready, this book is for you.

Not for the buyer who already has it figured out. Not for the person who just needs a nudge across the finish line. For you. The one sitting with a Zillow tab open and a quiet voice in the back of your head saying, "But what if I'm not ready yet?"

That voice makes sense. No one has explained the process to you in plain language. No one told you what you actually need versus what you think you need. And somewhere along the way, the gap between where you are and where you think you need to be started to feel too wide to cross.

This book exists to close that gap.

Here is my promise to you before we go any further.

Real talk. Real help. No pressure.

I am not going to push you toward a timeline. I am not going to tell you that you need to decide right now. I am not going to use this book to sell you something. What I am going to do is give you the clearest, calmest picture of what homeownership actually looks like for someone in your position, in your market, right now.

The Key Ready System™ is the framework that runs through every chapter of this book. It has eight steps, and each one builds on the last. You will learn how to check your readiness, understand your real numbers, protect your credit, get properly pre-approved, know what you actually need upfront, choose the right loan, search and tour with strategy, and make a competitive offer with confidence.

You do not have to read this straight through if that is not how you work. If you are in the middle of the process and Chapter 9 is where you actually need to start, start there. If you are just beginning and Chapter 3 is where everything starts to click, stay there until it does. Both work. The book is designed for where you are, not where you think you should be.

Here is what I know after years of walking buyers through this market. The buyers who have the best experiences are not the fastest ones. They are the most prepared ones.

Preparation is not about having every answer before you begin. It is about knowing what questions to ask and trusting that the answers are findable. That is exactly what this book gives you.

*One step at a time. That's how confident homeownership begins.*

## **Carli Plummer**

*Your RE Lady. Your RE Resource. Your First-Time Homebuyer Specialist.*

*Colorado Homes by Carli | Key Team Real Estate*

## CHAPTER 1

# What I Didn't Know Cost Me And What Waiting Is Costing You Right Now

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### THE REALITY

I have bought multiple homes in my life.

I made mistakes on almost every single one.

Not because I was careless. Not because I rushed in blind. I did what most buyers do. I found a house I liked, I got a loan, I signed the papers. I thought that was the process. Nobody told me there was more to it than that. Nobody told me what questions to ask, what to watch for, or what I was agreeing to. I had agents. I just did not have agents who were truly working for me.

The mistakes I made were not dramatic. They did not make headlines. But they cost me money I did not have to spend, stress I did not have to carry, and opportunities I did not have to miss. I bought emotionally. I signed things I did not fully understand. I made decisions based on what felt right instead of what I actually knew.

The worst part is not that it happened once. It happened more than once. Because nobody gave me the framework. Nobody sat me down beforehand and said, here is what you are actually doing, here is what it costs, here is what you need to know before you fall in love with a house.

That is why I wrote this book.

Not to tell you what I wish I had known. To give it to you directly, before you need it.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Here is something most people get wrong about homebuying.

They think the risk is in moving too fast. Buy the wrong house, overpay, lock yourself into something you regret. That fear is real and it is valid. But there is another risk that almost nobody talks about. The risk of not moving at all.

Waiting feels safe. It feels responsible. You are being careful. You are watching the market. You are going to buy when the time is right, when rates come down, when you have more saved, when you feel more ready.

That feeling of waiting is costing you money right now.

I want to be specific about this because vague warnings do not help anyone.

A few years ago, I had four buyers who were ready. Ready meaning they had gone through the process, they understood their numbers, they had pre-approvals in hand, and they had representation. When a window opened with a builder I had a relationship with, we moved. Those four buyers locked in at 3.99% rate buydowns. Full closing costs covered by the builder. Home purchase prices reduced. Closing costs 100% covered. Extras included. That was not luck. It was preparation meeting the right moment.

The buyers who were not ready missed that window entirely. The same homes and the same builder. A few weeks later, the deal changed. The incentives were gone. Those homes were under contract. The pricing adjusted. They were competing in a different market than the buyers who had been prepared.

That is how it works. Windows open and close. Prepared buyers walk through them. Buyers who are still getting ready watch them close.

The cost of waiting is not abstract. It is not a theory. It shows up in real numbers.

Every month you continue renting, you are helping pay down someone else's mortgage instead of building equity for yourself. That money is building equity for your landlord, not for you. The average rent today for a 3-bed/2-bath single family home in Metro Denver is \$ \$2,800–\$3,000 a month. If you are paying \$2,800 a month in rent and you wait twelve more months, that is \$33,600 that has disappeared. No equity. No ownership. No return.

Meanwhile, home prices in the Denver Metro do not wait for buyers to feel ready. They move. They have moved consistently. The home you are going to buy eventually will most likely cost more the longer you wait. Not because anything unusual is happening in the market. Because that is how real estate works over time.

And rates. Everyone is waiting for rates to drop. That is a reasonable thought. Rates may drop. They also may not drop on the schedule you are imagining. And here is what buyers who are waiting for rates to drop are missing: when rates drop significantly, demand increases. More buyers in the market means more competition. More competition means higher prices and fewer negotiating opportunities. The buyers who are already prepared when that shift happens will be positioned to move quickly and have the best chance to take advantage of the market window. Buyers who are still working on their credit, still figuring out their down payment, still looking for an agent, will be starting from zero in a hotter market.

*Prepared beats perfect.  
Every time.*

The buyers who win in this market are not the ones with the highest credit scores or the biggest down payments. They are the ones who understood the process before they needed it. They knew their numbers before they toured a house. They had their team in place before an opportunity appeared. When the right home came up, they were not scrambling. They were ready.

*That is what this book is here to help you become. Ready.*

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Before you go any further, do two things.

First, get honest about what waiting is actually costing you. Take your current monthly rent and multiply it by twelve. That is what you are paying per year with zero return. Zero equity. Zero ownership. It is money just gone. Write that number down. Look at it. That is not a scare tactic. That is just math.

Now think about where you are actually stuck. Most buyers are not stuck everywhere. They are stuck in one of three places.

Emotional hesitation. You want to buy. You have wanted to buy. But something keeps stopping you. Fear of the wrong timing, fear of the market, fear of locking yourself in. The hesitation feels like caution but it has been going on long enough that it is starting to feel like a pattern.

Financial assumption. You think you know what you need. Twenty percent down. Perfect credit. Stable everything. Most of those assumptions are wrong. The actual requirements are different from what you are imagining, and the gap between where you are and where you need to be is probably smaller than you think.

Information gap. You do not know what you do not know. The process feels like a mystery. There are too many steps, too many terms, too many moving parts. You are not sure where to start so you have not started.

Identify which one is yours. It might be more than one. That is fine. But knowing which category you are in tells you what this book is going to do for you.

If it is emotional hesitation, the next few chapters are going to reframe what readiness actually means. You will likely find that you are closer than you thought.

If it is financial assumption, Chapters 4 through 8 are going to replace your guesses with real information. Most buyers are relieved by what they find there.

If it is information gap, that is exactly what this entire book addresses. Every chapter removes one piece of the mystery.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Here is what changes when you stop waiting and start preparing.

You stop making decisions from fear. Fear of the market, fear of the timing, fear of making the wrong move. When you understand the process and know your real numbers, the fear does not disappear entirely. But it stops running the show.

You start seeing opportunities instead of risks. When you know your numbers, have your pre-approval, understand what a strong offer looks like, the market stops feeling like something that is happening to you. It starts feeling like something you can actually navigate.

And when the right window opens, you are ready to walk through it.

## THE KEY READY SYSTEM

That is what the buyers who locked in at 3.99 percent did. They did not have better luck than the buyers who missed it. They had better preparation. They had a framework. They had the right guidance in place. They had clarity before they needed it.

That is what this book gives you.

*One step at a time. Let's get started.*

## CHAPTER 2

# Why I Wrote This Book

## And Why Your Agent Matters More Than You Think

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### THE REALITY

Most buyers assume all agents are the same.

You call one, you call another, and you get roughly the same experience. Someone who shows houses, writes an offer, and collects a commission at closing. You could probably do most of it yourself. That is what people say. That is what a lot of buyers believe.

I believed it too. I was one of those buyers.

I bought homes with agents who were present in the way furniture is present. They were there. They did not do much. They did not ask good questions, they did not push back on anything, and they did not protect me from a single mistake. They showed up at closing and signed where they were supposed to sign.

Nobody told me.

At the time, I assumed that was just how buying a home worked.

I thought buyers were supposed to feel a little lost.

It took me years and more than one home purchase to understand what I had been missing. Not because I was not paying attention. Because I did not know what to look for. When you have never had an agent who was genuinely working for you, you do not know what that looks like. You accept the standard and assume that is simply how it goes.

It does not have to go that way.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Before I became a real estate agent, I spent more than twenty years in corporate America leading high-performing teams. My job was to negotiate, solve problems, manage competing deadlines, and deliver results under pressure. I had to understand the people across the table, anticipate where a deal might fall apart, and protect the outcomes my team was responsible for.

When I transitioned into real estate, I did not leave any of that behind. I brought all of it with me.

That background shapes how I work with buyers in ways that a traditional agent path simply does not produce. Spotting contract language that could hurt you three months from now. Reading a situation in a negotiation and knowing when to push and when to hold. Managing the emotional pressure of a competitive offer without letting urgency override strategy.

Those are not just real estate skills. They are leadership and negotiation skills applied to real estate. The difference matters.

Here is a story that illustrates exactly what I mean.

I was representing a buyer on a transaction where the home inspection flagged a significant roof issue. The seller's response was to promise to submit a claim to their insurance company to make the necessary repairs. That sounds reasonable. It is also essentially meaningless.

An insurance company can deny a claim. Repairs can be delayed indefinitely. A vague promise to "submit a claim" gives the buyer no real protection.

What the buyer needed was a guarantee that the roof would be replaced regardless of what the insurance company decided.

I caught the language. I rewrote the contract to reflect exactly that. A new roof, guaranteed, not contingent on insurance approval.

That is tens of thousands of dollars of protection that never shows up on a closing disclosure. The buyer never sees it as a line item. It just happens because someone was paying attention.

*That is what representation actually means.*

*Not showing you houses.*

*Protecting you in the places most buyers never think to look.*

That is also where many buyers misunderstand what agents actually do.

There is a version of the job that looks like this. An agent sets you up on an automated MLS search, opens the door when you want to see a home, and submits whatever offer you decide to write.

That is not representation.

That is access.

Access to listings is free. You already have it on Zillow, Redfin, and a dozen apps on your phone. What most buyers do not have is someone in their corner actively protecting their interests throughout the transaction. And most buyers only discover that difference after something has gone wrong.

There is also something that changed recently that every buyer needs to understand.

Because of the recent NAR settlement, buyers now sign buyer representation agreements before working with an agent. This is a formal document. It defines the relationship, the responsibilities on both sides, and how compensation works.

A lot of buyers hear that and feel uncomfortable. It sounds like a commitment. It sounds like something that benefits the agent.

But read carefully and it actually protects you.

It requires the agent to be explicit about what they will do for you. It creates accountability. It means you are hiring someone with clear expectations on both sides, not just hoping the person who showed you a house is going to show up for you at the negotiating table.

Another question buyers often ask is how the agent is paid.

In most transactions in our area, the seller still offers compensation to the buyer's agent through the listing brokerage. That means the buyer typically does not write a separate check for their agent at closing.

So far, none of my buyers have had to pay my commission out of pocket.

The representation agreement simply explains how compensation works and what would happen if a property offered less than the agreed amount. Compensation is always discussed up-front and, like any professional service, it is negotiable.

Good agents also build strong support systems around their clients.

Real estate transactions involve lenders, inspectors, title companies, contractors, and sometimes attorneys. An experienced agent usually has trusted professionals they work with regularly and a team behind the scenes helping manage the moving parts of the transaction.

That network makes the entire experience smoother for the buyer.

## **WHAT TO DO NEXT**

Before you sign any buyer representation agreement, treat it like a job interview.

You are the one doing the hiring.

Here are the questions that will tell you quickly whether an agent is the right fit.

How many first-time buyers have you represented in the last twelve months, specifically in the Denver Metro?

Walk me through what you do between accepted offer and closing.

Can you explain the buyer representation agreement to me in plain language? What does it commit me to and what does it commit you to?

What do you do when an inspection comes back with issues? What is your approach to negotiating repairs?

Do you have relationships with local lenders, inspectors, and trusted contractors or handymen you can refer me to?

Write those questions down. Ask them. Listen carefully to how the answers come, not just what is said.

Confidence, specificity, and honesty without overselling are what you are looking for.

Experience matters, but numbers alone do not tell the whole story. An agent who can clearly explain their process, anticipate potential problems, and walk you through decisions calmly will serve you far better than someone who only talks about how many homes they sell each year.

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## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

When you have the right agent, the entire experience changes.

Instead of trying to figure everything out on your own, you have someone in your corner who has done this many times before. Someone who understands the market you are entering and who is watching the details you did not know to look for.

The mistakes that trip up unprepared buyers become far less likely to happen to you. Not because you got lucky, but because someone was paying attention to the things that matter most.

The process itself starts to feel different.

Instead of chaotic, it becomes organized.

Instead of confusing, it becomes clear.

Instead of stressful, it becomes guided.

From the first conversation about your numbers to the moment you receive your keys, you move through the process with someone whose job is to protect your outcome.

Choosing the right agent is not a small decision in this process. It is one of the highest-leverage choices you will make.

It does not cost you more to have excellent representation.

But it can cost you significantly more not to.

*Let's keep going.*

## CHAPTER 3

# The Key Ready System™

## Why Most Buyers Start in the Wrong Place

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### THE REALITY

Here is the pattern I see more than any other.

A buyer finds a house they love. It happens fast. Maybe they were just browsing and something caught their eye. Maybe a friend sent them a listing. Maybe they drove through a neighborhood and something just clicked.

Then the search begins in earnest. The emotional investment builds. And somewhere in the middle of all that excitement, the buyer realizes they have no idea what their real numbers are. Now they are in the worst possible position.

They are attached to an outcome they cannot yet verify they can afford.

Excitement becomes pressure.

Pressure becomes urgency.

And urgency is exactly where buyers make the decisions they regret.

They overbid to win.

They skip questions they should ask.

They ignore things they should investigate.

Not because they are careless people.

Because they became emotionally invested before they were financially prepared.

The house came before the plan.

I have watched this happen to smart, responsible people who simply did not have a framework before they started looking.

The Key Ready System™ fixes that.

It starts with you, not the house.

Your readiness.

Your numbers.

Your plan.

So when you do find the right home, you move with confidence instead of panic. You already know your answers. Nothing catches you off guard.

That is the difference between a buyer who gets what they want and a buyer who later wonders what went wrong.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### **Readiness is Not a Number. It Is Clarity.**

#### **Most people define readiness as a financial threshold.**

The right credit score.  
The right savings amount.  
The right moment.

That definition keeps buyers stuck, sometimes for years, because the number they are chasing keeps moving or never feels quite reachable.

*Readiness is not a number.  
It is clarity.*

And it has four dimensions.

#### **Emotional Readiness**

Are you buying because you want to, or because you feel behind, pressured, or like you should?

There is a difference, and it matters more than most people admit.

Buying a home when you are emotionally ready means the decision feels intentional. You are not fleeing something. You are not trying to prove something. You are not doing it because your parents keep asking when you are going to stop renting.

You are doing it because it fits your life and it is what you actually want.

Reactive buying often creates regret.

Not because the math is wrong, but because the foundation was shaky.

This step is not about being fearless. Fear is completely normal.

It is about making sure the decision is yours.

#### **Lifestyle Readiness**

Does buying a home make sense for your life right now?

This is where job stability, relationship situation, commute, and your sense of where you want to be in the next few years come into play.

You do not need everything figured out.

Most people never have everything figured out.

But you need enough stability that a home supports your life instead of complicating it.

A home is not just a financial asset. It is also a physical anchor.

If your life is likely to shift significantly in the next twelve to eighteen months, that is worth factoring in before you commit.

## **Financial Readiness**

This is where most buyers get stuck. Usually because they believe they need far more than they actually do. Financial readiness is not about hitting a magic number. It is

about understanding your real situation. Your credit.

Your income.

Your savings.

Your comfort with a monthly payment.

Not the maximum a lender will approve.

The number that actually fits how you live.

We go much deeper on each of these pieces in Chapters 4 through 8.

For now, the most important thing to understand is this:

Financial readiness is about clarity, not perfection.

Many buyers who believe they are not ready financially are closer than they think.

## **Information Readiness**

Do you understand the homebuying process well enough to ask good questions and make confident decisions?

You do not need to know everything.

You do not need to become a mortgage expert or a contract attorney.

You simply need enough clarity that the process feels manageable instead of mysterious.

You need to know what steps are coming, what to expect at each stage, and who is responsible for what.

That is exactly what this book provides.

Here is the key thing to hold onto from this reframe.

Being ready does not mean zero debt.

It does not mean twenty percent saved.

It does not mean one hundred percent confidence.

If those were the requirements, very few people would ever buy.

Readiness is clarity.

It is a roadmap, not a report card.

It shows you where to go next. It does not judge where you are starting.

Each chapter simply walks you through the process the way I guide buyers every day.

## The Key Ready System™ -- 8 Steps

**Here is how the system works.**

**Each step has its own chapter.**

You do not need to understand everything right now. You only need to see the sequence and feel the relief that there is one.

Those eight readiness steps fit within four broader phases of the Key Ready System™. The rest of this book follows those phases in order, so each chapter builds on the one before it.

### **STEP 1**

Know Your Readiness. Emotional, lifestyle, financial, and information readiness.

### **STEP 2**

Understand and Protect Your Credit. The foundation everything else is built on.

### **STEP 3**

Get Pre-Approved the Right Way. A verified letter that makes you competitive.

### **STEP 4**

Know Your Real Numbers. The difference between what a lender approves and what you can comfortably live with.

### **STEP 5**

Understand What You Need Upfront. Three buckets, real amounts, real timing.

### **STEP 6**

Choose the Right Loan for Your Situation. Not the most popular loan. The right one for you.

### **STEP 7**

Search and Tour with Strategy. Clarity before you fall in love.

### **STEP 8**

Offer, Negotiate, and Close with Confidence.

Each step removes a guess and replaces it with clarity.

That is the whole system.

Preparation first. Decisions second.

## **WHAT TO DO NEXT**

Start here. Right now. Before you move to the next chapter.

At this point in the book, you do not need perfect credit, a lender approval, or a completed loan application.

You simply need clarity about where you are starting.

Most buyers delay the process because they assume readiness is a single number, such as a credit score, a savings target, or a perfect moment in the market. In reality, readiness is a combination of preparation, understanding, and timing in your life.

The easiest way to see where you stand is to step back and evaluate the bigger picture.

The **Homebuyer Readiness Index™** is a short assessment tool designed specifically to help you do exactly that.

It looks at the key areas that influence how smooth or stressful the buying process will feel, including preparation, expectations, and how well you understand the steps ahead.

It is not a loan application.

It is not a credit check.

It is simply a structured way to see where you are starting.

The assessment takes about two minutes and delivers your readiness tier to your email along with guidance on what most buyers focus on next.

You can take it at **buyer.carliplummer.com**

If you would rather start by simply understanding the full journey, the **Home Buying Process Roadmap** at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) lays out the entire path from preparation to closing in one clear visual sequence.

Most buyers only see the process one step at a time.

When you can see the full path, the steps stop feeling overwhelming and become manageable.

You do not need to solve everything today.

You only need to understand where you are starting.

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## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

When you understand where you stand, the process immediately feels different.

The vague anxiety that follows many first-time buyers begins to shrink.

Not because your circumstances suddenly changed, but because uncertainty is usually more stressful than reality.

Many buyers discover something surprising once they step back and look at the process clearly.

They are not as far behind as they thought.

Several pieces are already in place. The gaps that remain are usually smaller and more manageable than they imagined.

And once you can see those gaps clearly, the process stops feeling overwhelming.

You are no longer guessing.

You are following a sequence.

Clarity is the first win in this process. Not a house.

Not an offer.

Not even a pre-approval. Just a clear understanding of where you are so you can move forward with confidence instead of fear.

That is how this system works.

Every step replaces a guess with a fact.

This is your first one.

Now that you understand the sequence, we can start with one of the foundations of the entire process. It begins with understanding how lenders evaluate your financial picture.

## CHAPTER 3 RESOURCES

### **HOME BUYER READINESS INDEX™**

Ten question assessment that evaluates your readiness across key areas of the homebuying process, with scored results delivered to your email.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### **HOME BUYING PROCESS ROADMAP**

Seven-step visual overview of the full homebuying journey from preparation to closing

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: **buyer.carliplummer.com***

## CHAPTER 4

# Credit

## The Silent Deal Killer

Your credit is the foundation the entire financing process is built on. Your rate, your approval, your monthly payment for the next thirty years. All of it traces back to that three-digit number, and most first-time buyers either avoid looking at it, assume it is fine, or do not think about it until a lender pulls it and delivers news they were not prepared for.

### THE REALITY

I had a buyer come to me who wanted to buy in Aurora.

They had a steady income, a real desire to own, and a clear picture of the neighborhood they wanted. What they did not have was credit that matched where they wanted to go. Their score, combined with their debt-to-income ratio, limited them almost entirely to older resale homes from the 1970s-1980s. Not what they had envisioned. Not what they had been working toward. We did not give up. I connected them with one of my preferred lenders, who in turn connected them with a credit repair specialist. Not a sketchy online service. A professional who knew exactly which levers to pull and in what order.

Less than a year later, that same buyer closed on a brand new 4-bedroom, 3-bathroom home with a community pool in a newer, more upscale neighborhood. Not a compromise. Not a starter home they were settling for. The home they actually wanted. Secured before it was relisted publicly because I had kept the builder relationship warm.

The only thing that changed between the first conversation and the closing was their credit.

That gap, from “we can only look at 1970s homes“ to “brand new construction“ was built on credit improvement. That is not an exceptional story. That is what understanding and working your credit before you start can do.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### What Actually Moves Your Score

Credit scores are calculated from five factors. Understanding them takes the mystery out of why your score is where it is and what you can actually do about it.

Payment history is the biggest piece, making up roughly 35 percent of your score. Every on-time payment builds it. Every late payment damages it. If you have any history of late payments, the

most important thing you can do right now is stop adding to that record. Time and consistent on-time payments are what heal it.

Credit utilization is the second largest factor, roughly 30 percent. This is the ratio of how much credit you are using to how much you have available. If your credit limit is \$5,000 and your balance is \$4,200, your utilization is above 80 percent. That hurts your score significantly even if you pay on time. Lenders want to see utilization below 30 percent. Lowering balances, even without closing accounts, is one of the fastest ways to improve a score.

Length of credit history accounts for about 15 percent. This is why closing old accounts, even ones you do not use, can actually hurt you. Those accounts represent history. Their age contributes to your average account age. Leave them open.

Credit mix is about 10 percent. Lenders like to see that you can manage different types of credit responsibly. Credit cards, installment loans, an auto loan. Variety signals experience.

New inquiries make up the remaining 10 percent. Every time you apply for new credit, a hard inquiry hits your report. Multiple inquiries in a short window signal risk to lenders. In the months leading up to a home purchase, stop applying for anything.

### **What Silently Hurts Scores Without Buyers Knowing**

Closing old credit card accounts. It feels responsible. It can backfire. Closing an account reduces your total available credit, which raises your utilization ratio, which drops your score. It also removes account history. Unless there is a compelling reason to close it, leave it.

Co-signing for someone else. When you co-sign a loan, that debt shows up on your credit report. If the primary borrower misses a payment, it affects your score. If they default, it affects your score significantly. Do not co-sign anything while you are preparing to buy.

Applying for new credit cards, car loans, or personal loans. Even a retail store card. Even a promotional offer. Each application creates a hard inquiry and the new account lowers your average account age. Both hurt your score at exactly the wrong time.

And once you are under contract, none of this changes. In fact, the rules tighten. No new credit. No new debt. No large purchases, financed or otherwise. No job changes. Lenders pull your credit again before closing. Anything that changed between the first pull and the final pull can affect your loan approval, sometimes at the last minute.

### **How to Think About the Timeline**

Not every buyer needs to wait before moving forward. If your score is in good shape and your report has no significant issues, the path forward is toward pre-approval. That is the next step.

But if your score needs work, understanding what a realistic timeline looks like matters.

In three months, you can meaningfully improve utilization. Pay down balances, stop applying for new credit, let any recent inquiries age. This is a real improvement window, not a dramatic one, but enough to sometimes move you into a better rate tier.

In six months, you can repair the damage from a few late payments. Consistent on-time payments and reduced utilization together can produce meaningful movement. If you are close to the score minimum required for a particular loan type, six months of focused effort can get you there.

In twelve months, you can address more significant issues. Collections, high utilization that needs gradual paydown, a thin file that needs more history. This is also where a credit repair specialist, connected through a good lender, can create results that most buyers cannot produce on their own.

Improving your credit score can have a meaningful impact on your loan options and your monthly payment.

In some cases, even a modest improvement can change the interest rate you qualify for or expand the loan programs available to you. That difference can translate into hundreds of dollars per month and significant savings over time.

*The important thing is not guessing.  
A good lender can show you exactly how different  
score scenarios affect your options.*

At the same time, credit does not have to be perfect to move forward. Many buyers purchase homes with less-than-perfect credit using programs designed for that situation. Some improve their credit after buying and refinance later when the numbers make sense.

Throughout this book, I will also point out where lenders, agents, and other professionals play their role in the process so you know who to rely on at each step.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Do these three things before you go to the next chapter. Pull your credit report at [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com). This is the only website authorized by the federal government under the Fair Credit Reporting Act where you can access your credit reports from all three bureaus for free. You can access Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. You are not looking for your score right now. You are looking at your report. Check for anything that surprises you. Collections you did not know about. Accounts you do not recognize. Payment history that does not match your memory.

Identify any red flags. Collections are the most impactful negative item on a report. High utilization above 30 percent on any card. Multiple recent inquiries. Errors, because they happen and they are worth disputing. Note what you find. Do not panic about it. Just see it clearly.

Make one decision. Either your credit is in solid shape and you are ready to move toward pre-approval in the next chapter, or you have identified specific issues that are worth addressing first. If it is the latter, the path forward is not to figure this out alone. It is to have a conversation

with a qualified lender who works with buyers at every credit level, and let them connect you with the right resource for your specific situation.

That conversation is the next chapter.

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## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Most buyers who actually look at their credit find one of two things.

Either their situation is better than they feared, and the anxiety they had been carrying around was based on an assumption rather than a fact. That is a relief.

Or they find something specific, something fixable, with a timeline and a path. That is still a relief, because a known problem with a plan is better than a vague fear with no direction.

Either way, you have replaced a guess with a fact. That is the whole system working exactly as it is supposed to.

The buyer in Aurora did not need perfect credit to get to a brand new home. They needed a clear picture of where they were, a plan for what to address, the right professional help, and enough time to let the work show up on the report.

That is available to you too. The question is whether you start now or wait until a lender pulls your credit mid-search and delivers news you were not prepared for.

*Start now.*

## CHAPTER 5

# Pre-Approval Done Right

## Credibility Before You Tour a Single Home

Your credit is in order. Now we create the letter that tells sellers you are a serious buyer.

### THE REALITY

Picture two buyers making identical offers on the same home.

Same price. Same proposed closing date. Same basic terms.

One buyer submits a pre-qualification letter. They filled out an online form, entered their income and estimated debts, and got an automated response in four minutes telling them they might qualify for up to a certain amount. No documents verified. No income confirmed. No credit pulled.

The other buyer submits a pre-approval letter. They sat down with a local lender, provided two years of tax returns, pay stubs, bank statements, and employment verification. Their credit was pulled. Their income was confirmed. Their assets were reviewed. The lender signed off.

The seller does not know either of these buyers. They do not know their character, their intentions, or their financial history. The only information they have is what is in the offer package in front of them.

One of these buyers looks real. The other looks like they might be real.

In a competitive market, that distinction decides who gets the home.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### Pre-Qualification vs. Pre-Approval

These two terms get used interchangeably. They are not the same thing and treating them as equivalent is a mistake that costs buyers real opportunities.

Pre-qualification is an estimate. You provide information about yourself, the lender takes you at your word, and they give you a general sense of what you might qualify for. Little, if anything, is verified. No documents are reviewed. It takes a few minutes online and it does not mean very much to a seller who has seen it all before.

Pre-approval is verification. The lender has confirmed your income with actual documents. They have reviewed your assets and your employment history. They have pulled your credit. They have reviewed your file through an initial underwriting stage, and they have determined that based on what they have seen, you are approved to borrow up to a specific amount.

*When a seller sees that letter,  
they know you have been vetted.*

Pre-approval letters typically last 60 to 90 days, though some lenders extend them to 120 days depending on documentation and market conditions.

Some lenders, particularly strong local lenders, may take the process a step further by running your file through desktop underwriting or an early underwriting review. This is a deeper level of verification that can reduce surprises later in the process.

In competitive situations, that stronger level of approval can also make your offer more attractive. It may allow for a shorter closing timeline, sometimes as quick as 10 to 14 business days if the seller prefers a faster transaction.

That is the letter you want before you tour anything.

### **What Lenders Actually Verify**

**Income verification.** This means W-2s and tax returns for the last two years, recent pay stubs, and if you are self-employed, additional documentation showing your business income is stable. Lenders are not guessing at your income. They are confirming it.

**Assets.** Bank statements, investment accounts, retirement accounts. The lender is confirming that you actually have the funds for your down payment and closing costs, and that those funds have been sitting there long enough that they are clearly yours and not a last-minute loan from somewhere else.

**Employment history.** Two years of stable employment, in the same field, tells a lender a story about consistency. Job changes during this window are not automatically disqualifying, but they require explanation and can complicate things. A gap or a recent change is worth discussing with your lender early.

**Credit.** The full pull, all three bureaus, with a real look at your history, your balances, your patterns. This is where what you did in Chapter 4 shows up.

At some point during the process, your lender will ask when you want to lock your interest rate. A rate lock secures the interest rate for a set period, typically 30 to 60 days while the transaction moves toward closing and often involves costs. Your lender will guide you on timing based on the market and your closing timeline.

## How Pre-Approval Strengthens Your Position

A verified pre-approval tells the seller three things immediately. You are serious. You are capable. You have done the work.

It also gives you clarity that online calculators do not. You know exactly what you are approved for, what your monthly payment looks like at various price points, and what loan types you qualify for. You are not guessing anymore. You have a real number.

What pre-approval does not mean: you are obligated to buy. You are not locked into that lender. You are not committed to any timeline. You are simply armed with verified information that makes you a credible buyer in any conversation.

## The Four Types of Lenders

The lender you choose can matter more than most first-time buyers realize.

Before looking at the different types of lenders, it helps to understand what actually matters when choosing one. The best lender for you is not defined by the company name on the building. It is defined by how clearly they communicate, how well they explain your options, and how reliably they can move your loan from application to closing.

Responsiveness matters as well. When questions come up late in the process (or later on a Friday), having a lender who is accessible and able to respond quickly can make the entire experience much smoother.

With that in mind, most buyers encounter four general types of lenders.

**Big banks** have brand recognition, national programs, and consistency. Some offer their own grant programs or special financing options that can be valuable for certain buyers. Because they operate on a large scale, their processes can sometimes be less flexible, and underwriting decisions may happen outside your local market.

**Local lenders** are often known for personal service and direct communication. Many operate with in-house underwriting, which means questions and decisions can sometimes be handled more quickly. In markets where timing matters, that responsiveness can make a difference.

**Credit unions** can offer excellent rates and lower fees for members. If you already have a strong relationship with a credit union, this can be a very good option. Their processes can occasionally take longer, but many buyers are very happy with the experience.

**Mortgage brokers** shop your loan to multiple lending institutions and can sometimes uncover competitive rates or programs that are not widely advertised. Because brokers work with several lenders, the process can involve additional communication and coordination between parties. In some cases this works very well. In others, buyers find that responses or updates take a little longer as information moves between the broker and the lender handling the loan.

Each of these lender types can work well depending on your financial situation, your timeline, and the programs available at the time.

Different lenders also tend to specialize in different loan programs and buyer situations. The right choice is the one that understands your goals, communicates clearly, and can move your loan efficiently once you are under contract.

A knowledgeable agent can often help connect you with lenders who have a strong track record with buyers in your market so you can decide which one feels like the best fit for your situation. You can find a list of lenders many of my buyers have worked with successfully at **buyer.carliplummer.com**.

## What to Look For in a Lender

**Communication speed.** When you send a message on a Tuesday morning, you should hear back the same day. If they are hard to reach during the shopping process, they will be hard to reach when something matters at midnight before closing.

**In-house underwriting.** Ask directly. Does your team underwrite in-house or is it sent out? In-house means faster, more predictable, more controllable timelines.

**Proactive problem identification.** A good lender finds issues before they become surprises. They flag something in your file early, tell you what it means, and give you options. A reactive lender tells you about the problem the week before closing.

**Willingness to educate.** If a lender is too busy to explain what they are doing and why, they are too busy to serve you properly. You should understand every stage of what is happening with your loan.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Identify two or three lenders to interview. Use the Lender Recommendations page from **buyer.carliplummer.com** as your starting list. It includes Carli's vetted contacts and the criteria for choosing between them based on your situation.

Gather your documents before your first conversation. The Documents Needed Checklist at **buyer.carliplummer.com** covers income verification, assets, debts, and any additional documentation for buyers who own other property. Having these ready before the call makes the process faster and signals that you are serious.

Schedule the conversation. Not to commit. Not to start the loan. Just to understand what your range looks like with verified numbers, ask about the process, and get a sense of whether this lender communicates in a way that works for you. The right lender will feel like a partner, not a transaction processor.

Ask these questions in that first call. What is your typical timeline from application to pre-approval letter? Do you underwrite in-house? If something comes up with my file, who do I talk to? How do you prefer to communicate and how quickly do you typically respond? What loan types do you think fit my situation and why?

Listen to how they answer as much as what they say.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Pre-approval changes how the process feels.

Touring homes with a verified letter in hand is a different experience than browsing without one. You are not a curious visitor. You are a buyer. When you find a home you want to offer on, you are ready. There is no scramble, no delay, no catching up to the moment.

And when that letter comes from a lender with a local reputation, a lender your agent can call directly and vouch for, it carries weight that an online pre-qual never will.

You have done the work. The letter says so. That is how you walk into a competitive offer as a credible buyer instead of a question mark.

## CHAPTER 5 RESOURCES

### LENDER RECOMMENDATIONS PAGE

List of lenders many of Carli's buyers have worked with successfully, along with guidance on how to evaluate which lender may be the best fit for your situation.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### DOCUMENTS NEEDED CHECKLIST

Two-page preparation checklist covering income verification, assets, debts, and documentation required if you own other property.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### CARLI'S CLIENT HUB

Private resource area for active clients, including the Digital Buyer Questionnaire and additional onboarding tools. *buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: **buyer.carliplummer.com***

## CHAPTER 6

# Your Real Number

## Comfort vs. Max Approval

You have a pre-approval letter. It has a number on it. Here is the most important thing I need you to hear about that number.

### THE REALITY

*That number on your pre-approval letter  
is not your budget.*

It is the ceiling. The maximum the lender has determined you can borrow based on your income, your debts, and your credit profile. It is math. It is not a recommendation. It is not a suggestion for what you should spend. It is simply the highest number the guidelines will support.

And yet, almost every first-time buyer I have worked with has looked at that number and felt a pull toward it. If the lender says I can borrow this much, maybe I should. Maybe stretching now means I will not have to move again in five years. Maybe the bigger house is worth the bigger payment.

That thought is understandable. It is also one of the most common paths to buyer's regret.

The buyers who love their homes five years after closing are almost never the ones who bought at the top of their approval. They are the ones who looked at that number, set it aside, and asked a different question entirely.

What payment can I actually live with?

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

There are three numbers every buyer needs to understand before they tour a single home. Not one. Three.

#### **The Approval Number**

The Approval Number is what the lender says you can borrow. This is the ceiling, determined by your financials. It tells you the upper boundary of where you can go. That is all it tells you.

## The Comfort Number

The Comfort Number is what actually fits your life. Not your best-case financial scenario. Not what works if nothing unexpected ever happens. What works on a normal month, with normal life expenses, and still leaves you feeling like you can breathe. This is the number you need to find before emotions enter the picture, because once you are standing in a kitchen you love, your Comfort Number gets a lot harder to protect.

## The Reality Number

The Reality Number is the full monthly payment you will actually owe. Not just principal and interest. The complete picture. And in Colorado, that picture has more layers than most buyers expect.

### REALITY CHECK

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#### Pre-approval number

The maximum amount a lender will approve.

#### Comfort number

What actually fits your life.

#### Reality number

What you will truly pay each month.

The goal is not to buy the most house you qualify for.

The goal is to buy the home that fits your life without financial stress.

## What Makes Up Your Full Monthly Payment

### Mortgage Payment

Principal and interest is what most buyers think of when they picture their mortgage payment. It is the loan repayment portion. It is real, but it is not the whole story.

### Property Taxes

Property taxes in Colorado vary by location and are assessed on the home's value. They are not a small number. They show up in your monthly payment through your escrow account, and buyers who only think about the purchase price consistently get surprised when they see the full payment breakdown.

## **Insurance**

Homeowners insurance is required by your lender and protects your investment. In Colorado, premiums can vary widely depending on location and wildfire risk. Many buyers currently see estimates between \$150 and \$350 per month or more, and it is typically paid through escrow.

## **HOA & Metro District**

HOA fees apply if your home is in a community with a homeowner's association. These fees can range from \$50 to \$300 per month or more, depending on the community and the amenities or infrastructure being maintained. Always verify before you fall in love with a home.

Metro district fees are something most buyers outside of Colorado have never encountered. In the Denver Metro area, many newer developments — especially in suburban or expanding areas — sit within special taxing districts created to finance the infrastructure needed to build the community. Roads, utilities, parks, drainage systems, and other public improvements are often funded this way.

In most cases, the cost of that infrastructure is repaid over time through additional property tax mill levies attached to homes within the district. In some communities, metro districts may also impose separate fees, such as service charges, amenity fees, or transfer fees on home sales that are not part of the property tax bill.

These costs are not optional and remain attached to the property, meaning future owners assume them as well. Depending on the district, they can add hundreds of dollars to a monthly housing cost beyond the mortgage payment itself. Metro district information is disclosed in the community's public documents, and your agent or title company can help you locate the exact details for a specific property. We revisit this topic again in Chapter 12, but it is important to know they exist early in the process.

## **The Maintenance**

Maintenance reserve is the one-line item that rarely appears in a lender's calculation but should still be part of your own planning.

Homes require money to maintain over time. A commonly used guideline is to plan for roughly one percent of a home's value per year for long-term maintenance and repairs. On a \$500,000 home, that would be about \$5,000 a year, or roughly \$417 a month. That does not mean you will spend that every month. Some months will cost nothing. Other times a larger repair appears all at once.

Newer homes often require much less maintenance during the first several years, while older homes may need systems replaced sooner. The point of this guideline is not to create another bill in your monthly budget, but to remind you that homeownership includes ongoing upkeep.

Personally, I don't set aside that exact amount every month either. What I do understand, as both a homeowner and a real estate professional, is that many major systems eventually need to be repaired or replaced. Roofs age. HVAC systems wear out. Exterior paint needs attention. Planning for those kinds of expenses over time is what keeps homeownership feeling manageable instead of stressful.

### The 3 Questions to Test Your Comfort Number

If rates shifted slightly from what I am approved at today, would I panic? Rates can change between pre-approval and closing. A small movement in rate means a small movement in payment. If that movement would genuinely stress you, the payment may be too close to the edge.

If an unexpected \$2,000 expense appeared in the first six months, would I be okay? Appliance replacements, an HVAC issue, a plumbing problem. First-time homeowners are often surprised by how quickly small items add up. This is not a reason not to buy. It is a reason to know your number honestly.

Would this payment still feel good in twelve months? When the novelty has settled and it is just your life in your house, does this payment feel like something you chose on purpose or something you are stuck with?

If the honest answer to any of those questions gives you pause, your Comfort Number is probably lower than the number you were about to use.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Do this before you tour a single home.

Take the monthly payment figure from your pre-approval and add the additional layers. Get a property tax estimate from your lender or the county assessor's website for your target area. Get a homeowners insurance estimate. Look up whether the neighborhoods you are considering carry HOA fees or metro district assessments. Add a maintenance reserve line.

That total is your Reality Number. Compare it to what you have been picturing. For many buyers in the Denver Metro, the Reality Number is meaningfully higher than the principal-and-interest figure they had in mind.

Then find your Comfort Number. Work backward from your monthly income. Look at your current expenses. Think about what you spend on things that matter to your life, and whether this payment still leaves room for those things.

Your Comfort Number does not need to match your lender's approval number. It just needs to be honest.

The Home Payment Comfort Index at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) walks you through 10 questions and delivers a scored comfort tier to your email. Use it when you are ready to put a number to the feeling.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Knowing your Comfort Number before you tour changes the experience in a specific way.

You stop using the search to figure out what you can afford. That calculation is already done. When you walk into a home, you are evaluating whether it is the right home, not doing mental

math about whether the payment works. Those are two very different headspaces. One is calm and strategic. The other is anxious and reactive.

My happiest clients, the ones who call years later to say they still love their home, are the ones who chose their number intentionally.

For many of them, that number ended up below their maximum approval. They gave themselves breathing room. They could furnish the house without stress, handle a repair without it becoming a crisis, and live their lives without feeling stretched every month.

Others intentionally chose closer to their maximum because the home, the location, or their long-term plans made that choice worth it to them. The difference was that they understood the decision and were comfortable with it.

*That is what the right number does. It turns a house into a home instead of an obligation.*

## CHAPTER 6 RESOURCES

### **HOME PAYMENT COMFORT INDEX™**

Ten-question tool that helps you determine a monthly payment range that fits your real-life budget and comfort level.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: **buyer.carliplummer.com***

## CHAPTER 7

# The Three Buckets

## What You Actually Need Upfront

You know what you can afford monthly. Now let's talk about what you need to get there, and why it is almost certainly less than you think.

### THE REALITY

The number I hear most often from buyers who have been waiting is 20 percent.

I need to save 20 percent. I am not there yet. I am not ready.

That belief has kept more first-time buyers out of homes they could have owned than almost any other single assumption. It is not accurate. It is not required. And in many situations, putting 20 percent down is not even the best financial move.

Here is where that number came from. For most of the twentieth century, 20 percent down was the standard. Lenders wanted it. It was the normal thing. And that standard became cultural shorthand for being financially responsible. Your parents may have told you that. Their parents told them. It became the number people associate with being ready.

The mortgage market has changed significantly. There are loan programs today that require 3 percent down, others that require 3.5 percent, and some that may require no down payment at all for qualifying buyers. These are not unusual programs. They are widely used loan options that help millions of buyers purchase homes every year.

*The 20 percent myth  
is costing buyers years of equity.*

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Your upfront money breaks into three distinct buckets. They are not all due at the same time. They are not all the same amount. Understanding each one clearly replaces the vague fear of not having enough with a specific, achievable target.

#### **Bucket 1: Down Payment**

This is the percentage of the purchase price you pay upfront. The rest is financed. Conventional loans require a minimum of 3 percent down for many first-time buyers, with the option to put

more down if you choose. The higher the down payment, the lower your monthly payment and the less you pay in mortgage insurance.

FHA loans require 3.5 percent down with a credit score of 580 or higher.

VA loans require 0 percent down for qualified veterans and active duty service members. If you have served, explore this before anything else.

Most first-time buyers in today's market put down between 3 and 5 percent. Not 20. Three to five.

On a \$500,000 home, 3 percent is \$15,000. On that same home, 20 percent is \$100,000. Those are not the same thing, and they are not both requirements.

This is often the moment buyers realize they may not have to cover every dollar themselves.

There are down payment assistance programs in Colorado worth knowing about. Some are grants, meaning money you do not repay. Others are silent second mortgages with deferred repayment. Some come from builders as incentives available during specific windows, while others are offered through lenders as promotional programs tied to certain loan types. There are also smaller grants offered through various sources for specific groups such as teachers, firefighters, nurses, and others.

These programs have eligibility requirements and some have conditions attached. Not all of them are the right move for every buyer. But they exist, they are real, and ignoring them means potentially leaving money on the table. Your lender can walk you through what applies to your situation. Many buyers miss these opportunities when they try to shop for a loan entirely online instead of having a conversation about the programs available to them.

## **Bucket 2: Closing Costs**

This is where buyers get surprised. Not because the costs are hidden, but because they are rarely explained early enough.

Closing costs are the fees associated with completing your purchase transaction. They include lender origination fees. Title insurance, which protects your ownership rights and is required by your lender. Escrow setup fees. Prepaid items, including the first year of homeowners insurance and the initial deposits for property taxes and insurance placed into your escrow account so it is funded from day one.

Closing costs in Colorado typically run between 2 and 4 percent of the purchase price. On a \$500,000 home, that is \$10,000 to \$20,000. These are real numbers that show up at the closing table.

The good news is that closing costs can often be offset. Seller concessions, where the seller agrees to cover a portion of your closing costs as part of the negotiation, are common in a buyer or balanced market. Builder incentives frequently include closing cost coverage. Your lender may also have programs that address part of this. It is not guaranteed, but it is a negotiating tool and your agent should know how and when to use it.

### **Bucket 3: Upfront Out-of-Pocket**

This bucket covers the money you spend before closing that is separate from your down payment and closing costs.

Earnest money is a deposit you submit with your offer to show you are serious. In the Denver Metro it is typically around 1 percent of the purchase price, though in competitive situations it can be 1–2 percent or more. It is not lost money. If the transaction closes, earnest money credits toward your down payment and total funds due at closing. If the transaction falls apart for a reason covered by your contingencies, it is typically returned. Understanding when it is at risk is something we cover in Chapter 11.

Inspection fees are paid directly to your inspectors during the inspection period. In Colorado, a thorough inspection package includes a general home inspection, a sewer scope, and a radon test. Expect to pay roughly \$600 to \$900 for all three. Expect more if your property has well or septic. This is your investment in knowing what you are buying.

Appraisal fees are paid to the appraiser, typically through your lender. An appraisal is ordered after you are under contract and confirms the property's value. This cost is typically \$600 to \$900 depending on the property. Sometimes this cost is paid as part of your total at closing. Other times the lender collects the payment upfront.

These items happen at different stages of the transaction, not all at once on day one. Earnest money goes in with the offer. Inspection fees are paid during the inspection period. Appraisal is ordered later. The staggered timing matters. You are not writing one enormous check. You are managing a sequence.

### **What You Can Use and What You Cannot**

You can use personal savings. You can use funds from a 401k or retirement account, though early withdrawal rules and tax implications apply and you should consult a financial advisor. You can use proceeds from the sale of stocks or bonds, properly documented. You can use gift funds from a family member with proper documentation showing the money is a gift and not a loan and documentation of its source.

You cannot use credit cards. You cannot use a personal loan taken out for this purpose. You cannot use undocumented cash, meaning funds that cannot be traced to a verifiable source. Lenders require a paper trail. If the money cannot be explained and documented, it cannot be used. If you have undeposited cash, talk with your lender or agent first so they can guide you on how to document and apply those funds properly.

Just as important as understanding the three buckets is understanding where those funds are allowed to come from.

## **WHAT TO DO NEXT**

Take two minutes and run the numbers for your target price range.

Pick the price point you are aiming for. Calculate 3–3.5 percent for your down payment as a minimum and 2.5 percent for a conservative closing cost estimate. Add earnest money estimate of 1 percent. Add \$1,200 to \$1,800 for inspections and appraisal. That total is the amount you should plan to have available upfront.

**Remember that this is a planning number, not necessarily the exact amount you will personally pay.** Grants, down payment assistance programs, seller concessions, and builder incentives can sometimes offset portions of these costs depending on the transaction and the programs available at the time.

Then look at your current savings. If you are there, the path forward is pre-approval and the search. If you are not there yet, calculate the gap and divide it by how many months you have before you want to be ready. That becomes your monthly savings target. A real number with a real timeline.

Talk to your lender about what assistance programs apply to your situation. They know what is current, what you qualify for, and how each program affects your loan structure and monthly payment.

The goal is not to drain your account just to get the keys. It is to close with reserves still in place, money left after closing for the expenses that come with owning a home. Moving in with nothing left is a stressful way to start homeownership.

The entire system is designed to prevent that.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Something important happens when buyers replace the 20 percent assumption with actual numbers.

The timeline they thought they were looking at compresses. Dramatically, in some cases. Buyers who thought they needed three more years often find out they are twelve to eighteen months away. Sometimes closer. The gap between where they are and where they need to be is almost always smaller than what they had been imagining.

And remember, the number you just calculated is a starting point. Once you speak with a lender and explore the programs available to you, including grants, deferred assistance loans, seller concessions, or builder incentives, that number can sometimes come down. Many buyers discover they are closer than they initially thought.

That shift, from indefinite waiting to a concrete savings target and a real date, changes how the whole process feels. It is no longer abstract. It is planned.

And the buyers who move forward from that place, with real numbers and a real timeline, are the ones who arrive at closing without surprises. They knew what was coming. They prepared for it.

*That is exactly what this step is for.*

## CHAPTER 7 RESOURCES

### **THREE BUCKETS™ UPFRONT COST PLANNER**

Estimates the cash you may need to buy a home including down payment, closing costs, and inspection package.

*[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

*All chapter resources: [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

## CHAPTER 8

# Loan Types Without the Jargon

## Finding Your Best Fit

You know your numbers. Now let's make sure the loan structure behind those numbers actually fits your life, not just the guidelines.

### THE REALITY

I had a buyer who waited two years.

Not because they could not afford a home. Not because their credit was a problem. Because they believed they needed to qualify for a conventional loan before buying.

They had heard the same things many buyers hear. FHA meant permanent mortgage insurance. Sellers prefer conventional offers. Waiting a little longer would put them in a "better" position. That decision cost them real equity.

Home prices rose during those two years. The home they eventually bought cost more than a comparable home would have cost when they first started looking. They paid more for the same outcome, and the FHA loan could have gotten them there sooner and started the equity-building clock two years earlier.

The assumption that one loan type is always better than another is the kind of belief that sounds reasonable but can end up being expensive.

*The best loan is the one  
that fits your situation right now.*

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### Conventional Loans

Conventional loans are not backed by a government agency. They follow guidelines set by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and are the most common loan type for buyers with solid credit and stable income.

You need a minimum credit score of 620, though better rates come with higher scores. Down payment can be as low as 3 percent for first-time buyers, though many conventional buyers put

down more. There is no upfront mortgage insurance premium. If you put down less than 20 percent, you will have monthly private mortgage insurance, or PMI, but it is removable once you reach 20 percent equity in the home. That is a meaningful difference from some other loan types.

Conventional loans reward financial stability. Strong credit, reliable income, clean documentation. If you have those things, conventional is worth exploring with your lender as the primary option.

## **FHA Loans**

FHA loans are backed by the Federal Housing Administration and are specifically designed for buyers who are earlier in their financial journey. Lower credit scores qualify. Debt-to-income ratios can be higher than conventional guidelines allow. Down payment is 3.5 percent with a 580 credit score.

The tradeoff is mortgage insurance. FHA loans include an upfront mortgage insurance premium, currently 1.75% of the loan amount as of publication, typically paid at closing, plus a monthly mortgage insurance payment for the life of the loan in most cases. That is different from conventional PMI, which eventually goes away. Understanding that distinction and how it affects your total long-term cost is an important part of the comparison.

In some situations, particularly for buyers with credit scores in the mid-600 range, the monthly mortgage insurance on an FHA loan can actually be lower than the PMI on a comparable conventional loan. That does not make FHA automatically better, but it is one example of why running the numbers with a knowledgeable lender matters. The right loan structure depends on your credit profile, your timeline in the home, and whether refinancing later may be part of your long-term plan.

But FHA is not a consolation prize. It is a tool. For buyers with credit in the 580 to 620 range, or buyers whose debt-to-income ratio is higher than conventional guidelines allow, FHA may be the loan that gets them into homeownership two years earlier than waiting for conventional qualification would. And those two years of equity matter.

## **VA Loans**

VA loans are available to qualified veterans, active duty service members, and certain surviving spouses. If this applies to you, read this section carefully. And if you have served, thank you for your service.

No down payment required. No private mortgage insurance. Flexible credit standards. Competitive interest rates. A funding fee applies, though many veterans qualify for exemptions depending on their service status and disability rating. Your lender can explain the current fee structure based on your eligibility, which can be rolled into the loan in most cases, but even with that fee the overall cost advantage of a VA loan is significant.

VA loans exist because of your service. They are not a handout and they are not a last resort. They are an earned benefit, and if you qualify, exploring a VA loan before any other option is the

right move. Your lender should be able to walk you through eligibility and structure in the first conversation.

## **How Your Loan Choice Connects to Everything Else**

The loan you choose affects your Comfort Number from Chapter 6 because different loans carry different monthly costs, including mortgage insurance structures that are not identical across loan types.

It affects your upfront bucket totals from Chapter 7 because the down payment minimum varies by loan type, and some programs layer on top of specific loan structures.

And it affects your long-term picture because of how equity builds, when mortgage insurance ends, and what your total interest cost looks like over the life of the loan.

This is not a decision to make based on what sounds best. It is a decision to make with your lender, with your specific numbers in front of both of you, with a clear explanation of the trade-offs for your situation.

A good lender does not simply tell you which loan you qualify for. They show you the comparison. They walk through what each option costs monthly, what it costs over time, and what the implications are for your specific goals. If a lender is moving too fast to have that conversation, slow them down. This decision matters for the next thirty years.

## **WHAT TO DO NEXT**

Based on what you learned in Chapter 4 about your credit score and what you understand from Chapter 7 about your available funds, you now have enough context to identify which loan category likely fits your situation.

If your credit score is 620 or above and your finances are clean and documented, start the conventional conversation with your lender. Ask them to run the comparison against FHA if your score is closer to the bottom of that range.

If your credit score is in the 580 to 619 range or your debt-to-income is on the higher side, ask your lender to walk you through the FHA option specifically. Ask them to show you the long-term cost difference between FHA now and waiting for conventional later. The answer may surprise you.

If you have served in the military or are currently serving, ask your lender about VA eligibility in your first conversation. Before anything else.

Prepare these questions before you sit down with your lender. What loan types do I qualify for based on my current situation? What are the monthly cost differences between options? How does mortgage insurance work for each and when, if ever, does it end? What happens to my payment if I put more down, and is the tradeoff worth it? What are the long-term cost differences between these options for my specific numbers?

You do not need to become a mortgage expert. You need to understand the option you are choosing and why it fits you better than the alternatives. That is it.

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## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

When you choose the right loan for your situation instead of the loan that sounds most impressive, something settles.

The monthly payment you are planning around is accurate. There are no surprises buried in the mortgage insurance structure you did not fully understand. The total cost picture is something you actually looked at, not something you assumed.

And when you sit down to make an offer on a home, your pre-approval letter reflects a loan structure that your lender has already confirmed fits your profile. Not a best-guess. A verified match.

The buyer who waited two years for conventional qualification eventually got there. But potentially the buyer who understood that FHA was a legitimate path would have gotten there first, built equity during those two years, and been further ahead financially by the time the comparison even mattered.

Your best loan is the one that helps you move when you are ready and the opportunity is there.

*Find that loan.*

## CHAPTER 8 RESOURCES

### LOAN COMPARISON GUIDE

Conventional vs. FHA vs. VA side by side. Down payment minimums, mortgage insurance structure, credit score thresholds, and long-term cost differences.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### LENDER RECOMMENDATIONS PAGE

List of lenders many of Carli's buyers have worked with successfully, along with guidance on how to evaluate which lender may be the best fit for your situation.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

CHAPTER 9

# New Construction

## What Most Buyers Do Not See Coming

Everything you have learned in the last five chapters applies to resale and new construction equally. But new construction has its own set of rules, and most buyers walk into the builder's office without knowing any of them.

### THE REALITY

*The model home  
is designed  
to make you feel something.*

The lighting is perfect. The staging is precise. The sales representative is friendly and knowledgeable.

But they work for the builder.

The incentive board on the wall looks compelling. And the whole environment is engineered to move you from curious visitor to signed contract as efficiently as possible.

None of that is an accident.

Builders invest significantly in the sales experience because a buyer who walks in without representation, without information, and without a strategy is a buyer who is easy to close. Everything in that model home is optimized for one outcome. Yours is not it.

Earlier in the book I shared the story of four of my buyers who were ready during the same short window when a builder opportunity opened. That situation illustrates a larger point.

Outcomes like that rarely happen by accident. They happen when a buyer has strong representation and when their agent already has a strategy and builder relationships in place before the buyer ever walks into a builder's sales office or registers with a community.

Many builders have policies about when an agent can be involved in the process. Bringing your agent with you from the beginning protects your ability to have someone negotiating on your behalf. Once you register or begin working directly with a builder without an agent present, you may lose the opportunity to have anyone representing you and your side of the transaction at all.

Builders have professionals representing their interests in the transaction. When you bring your own representation, you bring someone whose responsibility is to protect yours.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### You Must Have Representation Before Your First Visit

This is not a preference. It is one of the most consequential decisions in new construction buying, and most buyers get it wrong because they do not know it matters.

Once you register with a builder, whether online, by phone, or in person, without an agent on record, adding representation later becomes significantly complicated. **Many builders will not recognize an agent** who was not present at the first contact. That means you could walk through a model home out of curiosity, give your name at the door, and unknowingly forfeit your right to have an agent negotiate for you.

Before you visit a single model home. Before you browse a builder's website and fill out a contact form. Before you drive through a new community and stop to ask someone in a hard hat a question. Have your agent established. That registration protects your ability to have a professional in your corner for everything that follows.

### The Myth That Going Direct Saves You Money

This is the most common misconception in new construction, and it is costing buyers real money.

Builders price agent commissions into every transaction before they set the sales price. The money for buyer representation exists in the deal whether you have an agent or not. If you walk in without one, the builder keeps that allocation. It does not come off the price. It does not get passed to you as a discount. It stays with the builder.

You do not save money by going unrepresented. You give money to the builder that could have funded your negotiation.

### What Is Actually Negotiable

New construction buyers who have never done this before often assume the price sheet on the wall is fixed. It is not.

**Purchase price.** Builders, particularly those with standing inventory or homes nearing completion, have real motivation to move units. A buyer with an agent who has an established relationship with that builder can negotiate price in ways a walk-in buyer cannot.

**Rate buydowns.** This is one of the most powerful tools in new construction right now. A permanent rate buydown, where the builder pays discount points to reduce the interest rate for the life of the loan, can produce a rate significantly below market. A 1 percent rate reduction on a \$500,000 loan saves approximately \$250 to \$350 per month. Over five years, that is \$15,000 to \$21,000 in payment savings. That is real money, not a rounding error.

## **MORTGAGE TIP**

### **WHAT IS A RATE BUYDOWN AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?**

A rate buydown occurs when a builder or seller pays money upfront to reduce the buyer's interest rate, either temporarily or permanently.

#### **Temporary buydown (Example: 2-1 buydown)**

Rate is lower in years 1–2, then adjusts to the full rate in year 3. This lowers the buyer's monthly payment in the early years but does not change the long-term interest rate on the loan.

#### **Permanent buydown**

Builder pays discount points to reduce the rate for the life of the loan. This is what the 3.99% example in this chapter represents, a rate significantly below market that remains in place for the full life of the loan.

#### **Why it matters**

A 1% rate reduction on a \$500,000 loan can lower monthly payments by roughly \$250–\$350.

#### **Key question to ask**

Is the buydown tied to the builder's preferred lender or can it be used with your own lender?

Closing cost coverage. Builders frequently offer to cover a portion or all of the buyer's closing costs as an incentive. The timing and availability of this changes. Having an agent who knows when to ask and how to structure the request matters.

Upgrade credits and lot premiums. Structural upgrades, meaning things you cannot change after closing like floor plan modifications and certain finishes, are negotiated at contract. Cosmetic upgrades, meaning flooring, lighting fixtures, and cabinet hardware, are often done far cheaper after closing through your own contractors. Know the difference before you sit down with the design center.

Move-in timeline. Builders sometimes have flexibility on closing dates that buyers do not think to ask about. If your lease ends at a particular time or you need to coordinate a sale, this is worth the conversation.

## **Builder Incentives and Preferred Lenders: What Buyers Should Know**

Many builder incentives, including rate buydowns and closing cost coverage, are tied to using the builder's preferred lender. That is not always a problem. Sometimes the builder's lender offers genuinely competitive terms. But sometimes the incentive package is structured in a way that benefits the builder more than the buyer.

Always ask this question before accepting any incentive tied to a preferred lender. Is this buydown or credit available if I use my own lender, and if not, what is the actual difference in total cost between using yours and using mine? The answer to that question tells you whether the incentive is a real benefit or a sales mechanism.

## **Evaluating a New Build Neighborhood**

Metro district structure is the first thing to understand in any new construction community. As covered in Chapter 6, metro districts can add hundreds of dollars per month to your housing cost and they are attached to the property permanently. Get the full metro district disclosure before you fall in love with a floor plan.

HOA fees and restrictions vary significantly between communities. Some HOAs are minimal and maintain common areas. Others are more involved in ways that affect how you can use your property. Read the documents before you commit.

In some new construction communities, the HOA may not be fully established at the beginning of development. The builder's governing documents often include the right to establish or modify the association as the community grows. Buyers should understand what the planned HOA structure may include, what amenities are expected to be added, and the estimated future fees associated with those amenities. As a general rule, the more amenities a community offers, the higher the ongoing HOA costs tend to be.

Builder reputation is worth researching. Look at reviews from buyers in completed phases of the same community. Ask your agent what they know about build quality in communities from this builder. A new home warranty protects you for a period of time, but a builder with a strong track record creates fewer warranty situations to begin with.

Phase pricing is something buyers in active communities should understand. Builders often release homes in phases and adjust pricing as a community develops and demand is established. Buying in an earlier phase sometimes means better pricing. It also sometimes means living next to active construction for an extended period. Your agent should help you think through the timing trade-offs.

In Colorado, buyers also have the right to review HOA documents during the contract period and terminate the contract if the association rules, finances, or restrictions are not acceptable. This review period is separate from the inspection and is an important protection for buyers in HOA communities.

## What to Upgrade and What to Skip

At the design center appointment, you will be presented with options for everything from flooring to countertops to lighting. The pricing in the design center is typically marked up significantly from what those same items cost if purchased and installed after closing.

The simple rule: upgrade at contract only what you cannot change later. Structural modifications, floor plan changes, certain rough-in additions for future features. These require builder involvement and cannot be done after the fact. Everything else, flooring, fixtures, hardware, paint, can be done after closing for a fraction of the design center price. Going over budget in the design center is one of the most common and most preventable new construction mistakes.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Before you visit any builder community, have a conversation with your agent about which builders are active in your target area and price range, which communities your agent has existing relationships with, and what the current incentive landscape looks like.

Commit to this: no builder contact of any kind, online form, phone call, model home visit, or community drive-through where you stop and talk to anyone, without your agent established first. This is not excessive caution. It is how you protect your ability to be represented for the entire transaction.

Use the New Construction Checklist at **buyer.carliplummer.com** to prepare questions before any builder conversation. It covers what to ask before the visit, what to verify before signing the contract, how to evaluate the metro district disclosure, and how to approach the costly upgrade decision.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

New construction with good representation is one of the best opportunities in the Denver Metro for a first-time buyer right now.

The four buyers I mentioned at the start of this chapter did not get those terms because they were lucky or because they happened to show up on the right day. They got them because they had an agent who had built a real relationship with that builder over time, who knew what the builder was motivated to offer in that window, and who knew how to structure the conversation to get it.

That Aurora buyer who started looking at 1970s homes and ended up in a brand new 4-bedroom in a more upscale community with a pool did not get there by walking into the model home alone. They got there because of a relationship, kept warm over time, that delivered an opportunity before the home ever hit the public market.

New construction without representation is a transaction done entirely on the builder's terms. New construction with the right representation is a negotiation. Those are not the same experience and they do not produce the same outcomes.

*You deserve the best experience.*

## CHAPTER 9 RESOURCES

### NEW CONSTRUCTION CHECKLIST

Key questions to ask before visiting a builder, what may be negotiable, what to verify before signing, how to evaluate upgrades, and how to review metro district and HOA.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: **buyer.carliplummer.com***

## CHAPTER 10, PART 1

# Search Smart

## How to Find Homes Without Burning Out

Your financing is in order. Your numbers are clear. Now comes the part most buyers look forward to, and the part that most often turns excitement into exhaustion. Let's fix that before it happens.

### THE REALITY

I have had buyers who toured more homes than they needed to. And I have heard plenty of stories from buyers who looked at thirty or forty homes before making a decision.

By that point, the search often starts to work against them. Kitchens blur together. Floor plans start to feel the same. Buyers begin making decisions based on exhaustion rather than judgment. What began with excitement slowly turns into a feeling of just wanting the process to be over. And that is exactly when bad decisions tend to happen.

*More homes do not create clarity.  
They create fatigue.*

And fatigue is the enemy of a good purchase decision.

Here is something that might be reassuring if you are worried about not knowing exactly what you want yet. Most buyers do not fully know their preferences before they start looking. They figure it out by looking. Early tours are not wasted. They are educational. They are how preferences sharpen. Seeing a home that does not work teaches you something real about what does. That is a normal and necessary part of the process.

The problem is not the search. The problem is searching without a structure that captures what you are learning along the way. Without that structure, the lessons evaporate after each showing. Preferences never solidify. Buyers keep looking because they feel like they have not found clarity, when in reality the clarity was accumulating the whole time. They just had no way to hold onto it.

That is exactly why tools like the **Home Tour Scorecard** exist. Taking two minutes to capture your impressions before you even leave the driveway helps preserve what you noticed while it is still fresh, so each showing builds clarity instead of fatigue.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### **Online Search Narrows. In-Person Tours Decide.**

Online photos are good at showing you what a home looks like. They are not good at showing you what a home feels like.

Photos cannot convey noise. Traffic from the road you cannot see in the listing. A neighbor whose yard is just off the frame. Natural light quality at different times of day. How the layout actually flows when you are moving through it rather than looking at a floor plan. The temperature of a room. The smell of a basement. The way the kitchen feels when you stand in it versus how it looks in a perfectly staged photograph.

Use online search for what it is actually good at: eliminating homes that clearly do not fit and creating a manageable shortlist. The decision happens in person. Every time.

### **How Many Homes Should You See?**

There is no correct number. The goal is clarity, not quantity.

Early in the search, tour more freely. You are learning. You are calibrating. You are figuring out what matters to you and what you thought would matter but actually does not. That is valuable work and you cannot skip it.

Once patterns start emerging, once you notice that you keep reacting the same way to the same features, shift from exploration to evaluation. You are no longer learning what you want. You are looking for it.

That shift usually happens somewhere between five and fifteen homes for most buyers. Not thirty or forty.

### **The Three Kinds of Comparison Fatigue**

Comparing every home to the last one is the first trap. Each new home gets evaluated against the most recent one rather than against your actual criteria. The result is a constantly shifting frame of reference that makes it impossible to feel settled on anything.

Comparing real homes to idealized ones is the second trap. Listing photos are staged and shot by professionals at their best moment. Social media home content is curated and filtered. Real homes, including the right one for you, will not look like a magazine spread. Calibrating your expectations to real homes rather than content-optimized ones is essential.

Comparing yourself to other buyers is the third trap. Someone else closed on something. Someone else found theirs in two weeks. Someone else is already under contract. None of that information is relevant to your search. Your timeline is your own. The right home for you is not the home that closed for someone else.

## A Search Strategy That Actually Works

Define your Needs versus Wants before you tour anything. Needs are the things the home must have for your life to work in it. Wants are things you would love but can live without. The distinction matters because you will never find a perfect home. You will find good homes with trade-offs. Knowing which trade-offs you can live with and which you cannot is what makes the decision possible.

The **Wants vs. Needs Worksheet** at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) covers this in detail, including renovation preference, HOA tolerance, new build versus resale preference, and a feature ranking table. Complete it before your first tour, not after.

Limit tours to four or five homes per day. More than that and the homes blur together. The last home of a long day gets evaluated by a tired brain. That is not how you want to be making this decision.

### TOURING TIP

Most buyers think seeing more homes will help them decide faster.

The opposite is usually true.

After five or six showings, kitchens start to blur together, layouts feel similar, and buyers begin comparing homes to the last one they saw instead of their actual criteria.

Limit showings to four or five homes per day.

Clarity comes from reflection, not volume.

Take brief notes immediately after each showing, before you get in the car. What worked, what did not, one clear reaction. Not a full review. Just enough to capture the impression before the next home replaces it.

Use the **Home Tour Scorecard** at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) for every showing. It scores each home across kitchen, systems, exterior, community, and interior. It gives you a framework to compare what you are seeing.

(You do not have to complete every score in the moment. Many buyers simply circle the features they liked, jot a quick note, or mark a few key ratings while the home is still fresh in their mind. You can total the scores later if you want a side-by-side comparison.)

The goal is not perfection. The goal is to capture enough information that when two homes are competing for your attention later, you have something concrete to come back to instead of relying on memory alone.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Before you schedule your first showing, complete the **Wants vs. Needs Worksheet**. Do not skip this step. Buyers who skip it are the ones who tour forty homes. Buyers who complete it typically find clarity much faster because they know what pattern they are looking for.

Download the **Home Tour Scorecard** and commit to filling it in at every showing. Not later at home. At the home, before you leave. The discipline of capturing your reaction in the moment is what separates useful data from faded impressions.

Set your per-day touring limit and hold to it. Four to five homes maximum. Tell your agent. Make it a boundary, not a preference.

When you finish a round of showings, review your **Home Tour Scorecards** before discussing the homes with anyone else. See what your notes and scores say before emotion or outside opinions start influencing the decision.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Buyers with a search strategy do not burn out.

They accumulate clarity instead of fatigue. Each showing adds to a real picture of what they want rather than dissolving into a blur of granite countertops and open floor plans. Patterns emerge. Preferences sharpen. And when the right home comes up, they recognize it faster because they have been keeping score the whole time.

*That is not an accident. That is the strategy working.*

## CHAPTER 10, PART 1 RESOURCES

### WANTS VS. NEEDS WORKSHEET

Clarify priorities by ranking renovation tolerance, HOA preferences, new build interest, and must-have home features.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### HOME TOUR SCORECARD

One sheet per home to capture quick notes and score Kitchen, Systems, Exterior, Community, and Interior for side-by-side comparison.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: **buyer.carliplummer.com***

CHAPTER 10, PART 2

# Tour with Intention

## What to Notice, What to Ignore, and How to Know

You know how to search. Now let's talk about what actually happens when you walk through the door, because most buyers are evaluating the wrong things entirely.

### THE REALITY

I have watched buyers walk out of a showing and say they loved it. When I asked what they loved, they described the furniture.

The sectional was perfect. The kitchen was so organized. The way they had the dining room staged was exactly the vibe I want.

None of that was part of the home. All of it was leaving with the sellers.

And I have watched buyers walk out of a showing saying they were not sure. The paint is so dark. The carpet is terrible. It smells like their dog.

Paint changes in a weekend. Carpet comes out in a day. Pet smell almost always leaves with the source.

Both of those buyers were evaluating the wrong things. One was falling for staging. The other was rejecting cosmetics. Neither one was evaluating the actual home.

*The purpose of a tour  
is not to fall in love.  
It is to gather information.*

The buyers who approach it that way make better decisions with less stress and fewer regrets than the ones who let the staging or the smells drive the verdict.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### What to Focus On: The Things That Cannot Change

Location is permanent. The neighborhood, the street, the proximity to the things that matter to your daily life. You can renovate every inch of a house. You cannot move it.

Layout is nearly permanent. The flow between rooms, where the bedrooms sit relative to the living spaces, whether the kitchen opens to the family room or faces a wall. Structural changes to layout are expensive, complicated, and sometimes not possible. If the layout does not work for how you actually live, it will not work after you move in.

Lot and orientation matter more than most buyers realize. How much yard there is and how it is positioned. Whether the home gets morning light in the rooms where you want it. Whether there is a fence line that creates privacy or a view that cannot be blocked. In Colorado, even the direction the home faces can matter. Sidewalk snow removal is required by law within 24 hours of a snowfall, and the direction your front yard faces can affect how quickly snow melts on your driveway and walkways. These are fixed characteristics. Notice them.

Natural light quality is something photographs consistently misrepresent. A photo shot on a bright afternoon with wide-angle lenses and enhanced exposure can make a dim room look inviting. Stand in the space at the time of day you would normally be home. Notice where the light comes from and how much of it there is.

Noise levels are invisible in photos and critical in person. Stand still and listen. Traffic from a nearby road. An HVAC system that runs constantly. A neighbor's dog. The acoustic character of the neighborhood is part of the home you are buying.

Overall flow is how the home feels to move through rather than how it looks standing still. Does it feel open or compressed? Does the transition from the entry to the main living areas feel natural? Is there a room that feels disconnected from the rest of the house in a way that matters for how you would use it?

### **What to Ignore: The Things That Are Temporary**

Paint color. It changes in a weekend and costs almost nothing relative to a home purchase.

Staging, furniture, and decor. None of it stays. The home you are buying is the structure, the systems, and the layout. Not the sectional or the gallery wall.

Carpet. Old carpet comes out easily and what is underneath is often in better shape than what was covering it.

Minor cosmetic smells, including pet odor in most cases. Deep clean, paint, new flooring, and the smell goes with the previous owners. This is not worth rejecting a home that otherwise works.

Dated fixtures, hardware, and finishes. A home from 2005 with original brass hardware is not a dated home. It is a home with inexpensive things that are easy to update. Kitchen hardware and light fixtures are among the most cost-effective changes a homeowner can make.

Landscaping and yard condition. Whatever the current owner has or has not done with the yard is not a reflection of what you will do with it. Look at the bones of the lot, not the current state of the lawn.

## How to Actually Tour a Home

Slow down. Most buyers move through a home faster than they should, rushing from room to room as if the goal is to see everything quickly. The goal is to feel what the space is actually like.

Pause in each main living area for sixty seconds. Just stand there. Do not evaluate out loud yet. Notice what you notice. How does the room feel at its natural scale, not just how it photographs? Does it feel like a space you would actually want to spend time in?

Open things. Closets, kitchen cabinets, the door to the garage. You are not snooping. You are buying. Check storage capacity. Check the condition of things that are harder to see in photos.

Look at what the camera avoided. Listing photographers are skilled at making rooms look their best. Look at what the wide-angle lens compressed. Look at the wall the camera was up against. Look at the view from the window the photographer was not facing.

Take notes before you leave the driveway, not at home that evening. You are going to see other homes. Your immediate impressions are the most accurate ones. Use your **Home Tour Score-card** to write them down before the next home replaces them.

## Every First Home Involves Compromise

This is worth stating plainly because many first-time buyers spend a lot of time searching for a home that requires no compromises. That home rarely exists.

Your first home is your first home. For most people today, it is not their forever home. Jobs change. Families grow and shrink. Some buyers eventually want a larger yard, others decide they want less maintenance. Some move to be closer to schools, others to be closer to grandchildren.

I know this personally. I spent most of my life in my hometown in Illinois before my career brought me to Colorado (via Hawaii), where I met my husband and built a new life. That move happened more than twenty years ago. Life changes. Housing needs change with it.

Every first home involves trade-offs. The right neighborhood at a slightly smaller size. The right layout with dated kitchen finishes. The right price point with a yard that needs attention. Something will not be exactly what you pictured. That is not a failure of the search. That is just reality.

The question is not which home has no trade-offs. The question is which home has trade-offs you can live with versus trade-offs that will drive you crazy in three years. An imperfect kitchen in the right layout is fixable over time. The wrong layout is not. A smaller yard in the right neighborhood is a daily quality-of-life decision. The wrong neighborhood is one too.

Knowing your non-negotiables before you tour is what makes the compromise conversation possible. That is what the **Wants vs. Needs Worksheet** does. It helps you identify the trade-offs you already know you cannot make, so you are not discovering them **while standing in a home you already like**.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

Use the **HomeTourScorecard** from Part 1 at every showing, filled in before you leave the driveway.

Practice the sixty-second pause in each main room. Stand still. Stop talking. Notice.

Before you begin scheduling tours, identify your **top three non-negotiable features** using the **Wants vs. Needs Worksheet**. These should come from the highest-priority items in your Needs column. If a home does not have them, no other quality changes the answer. Decide these before you book showings so you are not trying to figure them out in the middle of an emotional walkthrough.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

When you tour with intention instead of emotion, something changes.

Homes that are not right reveal themselves faster. You identify them quickly and move on without second-guessing. The homes that do work rise to the surface more clearly because you have been keeping score rather than keeping feelings.

And when the right home comes up, you know it. Not because it is perfect. Because it has the things that matter and the trade-offs it requires are ones you already decided you can make.

That makes this a confident decision. Not a reactive one. That is exactly what the strategy is built to produce.

The search is almost done.

*Now let's talk about what happens when you find it.*

## CHAPTER 11

# Making a Competitive Offer

## How to Win Without Always Being the Highest Price

You found a home that works for you. Now the question is not just what to offer. It's how to make an offer that actually wins.

The reality is that winning a home is not always about price. In many transactions, the strongest offer is the one that makes the seller feel the most confident the deal will close. Price matters. But certainty, timing, and structure often matter just as much.

### THE REALITY

Buyers who aren't prepared to make an offer when the right home appears pay a real price for it. Not a metaphorical price. A real one.

The window that was open when they found the home closes while they are getting ready. The next offer they make is for less favorable terms on a less favorable home in a more competitive situation. The hesitation compounded.

I have watched this happen many times in resale markets. A buyer finds the home that checks their boxes. The layout works. The neighborhood feels right. But they are unsure about the process or want more time to think. They decide to wait until the next day before writing an offer.

By the next morning the home is already under contract.

The buyers who win those homes are rarely the ones with the highest budgets. They are the ones who understood the process before they needed it. When the right home appeared, they were ready to move.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### What Sellers Evaluate Beyond Price

A seller reviewing multiple offers is not just looking at a number. They are looking at the probability that the transaction closes.

Financing strength and the type of pre-approval matters. A verified pre-approval from a known local lender carries more weight than an online estimate. Sellers and their agents know the difference. The letter that reflects real underwriting tells a different story than the letter that reflects a five-minute online form.

Closing timeline is a real negotiating tool. Some sellers need to close fast. Some need extra time. Matching the timeline to the seller's situation, when your agent has information about their circumstances, can make an offer at asking price more attractive than an offer above it with an inconvenient close date.

*A higher offer that falls apart in week three  
is worth less than a solid offer  
that closes on time with no drama.*

A proactive agent does not wait for the counteroffer stage to discover what matters most to the seller. Before the offer is written, they often communicate with the listing agent to understand the seller's priorities. Sometimes it is timing. Sometimes it is limits on inspection negotiations. Sometimes it is certainty that the buyer can perform. That information allows your offer to be structured in a way that aligns with what the seller actually cares about.

Contingency structure affects how much risk the seller is taking on by accepting your offer. Every contingency is a door you can potentially walk out of. Sellers understand this. That does not mean you should waive contingencies recklessly. It means you should understand what each one does and be prepared to have an informed conversation about which ones are essential and which ones have flexibility.

Cleanliness and simplicity of the contract itself signals professionalism. A clean offer with clear terms and no unusual requests tells the listing agent that the buyer's agent knows what they are doing. That reputation matters in a competitive situation.

## **Earnest Money**

Earnest money is the deposit you submit with your offer. It goes into an escrow account and demonstrates that you are a serious buyer willing to put real money behind your intent.

Earnest money is often around 1 percent of the purchase price, though in competitive situations buyers may increase it to 1 to 2 percent or more to strengthen their offer. A higher earnest money amount signals stronger commitment and can be a differentiator, even when the offer price is the same as another buyer's.

Earnest money is not at risk by default. If you exit the transaction during a period covered by a contingency, you typically get it back. Where it becomes at risk is if you waive contingencies and then try to exit anyway, or if you simply decide you do not want to proceed outside of a protected window. Your agent will walk you through exactly when your earnest money is protected and when it is not before you submit anything.

## **Contingencies Explained**

Contingencies are protections built into the purchase contract that allow you to exit the transaction or renegotiate under specific circumstances.

The inspection contingency gives you the right to have the home professionally inspected and to request repairs, credits, or cancellation based on what the inspection reveals. This is a protection I never recommend waiving regardless of market conditions. You need to know what you are buying. The cost of waiving this contingency to win a bidding war can be an undisclosed defect that costs tens of thousands of dollars after closing.

The appraisal contingency protects you if the home appraises for less than your offer price. Without it, you are obligated to make up the difference in cash or negotiate with the seller, or risk your earnest money. In a competitive market, buyers sometimes modify this contingency rather than waiving it outright. Your agent can explain the range of options.

The financing contingency protects you if your loan falls through. It is a safeguard between your pre-approval and your actual loan closing. Changes in your financial situation, a lender issue, or a significant problem uncovered during underwriting can all create scenarios where this protection matters.

Understanding each contingency before you are sitting at a kitchen table trying to decide under competitive pressure is essential. This is a conversation to have with your agent before you need to make an offer, not during it.

## **Escalation Clauses**

An escalation clause is an offer provision that automatically increases your offer price above competing offers up to a specified maximum. For example, you offer \$500,000 with an escalation clause stating you will beat any competing offer by \$2,000 up to a maximum of \$524,000.

Escalation clauses can be useful in genuinely competitive multiple-offer situations. They can also reveal your ceiling to the seller before they need to ask for it. Whether to use one, and how to structure it, is a strategic decision that depends on the specific situation. Discuss escalation clause strategy with your agent before you are in a multiple-offer scenario, not while you are emotionally processing the news that there is competition on your home.

## **Seller Concessions**

A seller concession is when the seller agrees to cover a portion of your closing costs as part of the negotiation. This is different from a price reduction. You are paying the full price, but the seller is returning a portion at closing to offset your costs.

Seller concessions can be used in more than one way. They may reduce the cash you need to bring to closing by covering lender fees, title costs, or prepaid items. In some situations, they can also be applied toward a mortgage rate buydown which can lower your monthly payment more meaningfully than a small price reduction would.

How concessions are best used depends on your loan type, your financial goals, and the programs available at the time. Your lender can walk through the different options so you understand how each approach affects your monthly payment and total cost over time.

Seller concessions are more available in certain market conditions than others. Your agent should have a clear read on whether asking for them strengthens or weakens your offer in the

current environment. In some situations, requesting concessions signals that the buyer is financially stretched. In others, it is a standard part of the negotiation. Context matters.

## **Resale vs. New Construction Offer Strategy**

The offer dynamics are different in new construction. You are negotiating with a builder, not a homeowner. The emotional variables are different. The leverage points are different. Builder contracts are written by the builder's attorneys. The negotiation is about what goes into the contract before it is signed, not what changes after.

Builders are operating a business. Their decisions are driven by numbers, inventory management, and sales timelines rather than the personal story of the buyer. Incentives, upgrades, pricing adjustments, and closing cost contributions are all tools builders may use depending on the stage of the community and the pace of sales. Understanding those dynamics is part of negotiating effectively in a new construction environment.

For resale, you are negotiating with a person who has memories in the home. That emotional dimension can still influence how sellers evaluate offers. A clean contract with clear terms, a closing timeline that fits the seller's plans, and strong financing that signals certainty of closing can make one offer stand out over another even when the price is similar. Human factors influence resale negotiations in ways they do not in new construction.

Know which type of transaction you are in and have a strategy appropriate to it.

## **WHAT TO DO NEXT**

Before you are in a situation where you need to make an offer, work through these things with your agent.

Understand your earnest money position. How much are you prepared to put forward and what does that signal to the seller in your target price range?

Review the contingency framework. Know what each one protects, what removing or modifying each one means, and where your personal lines are. Decide before the emotion of a real offer situation, not during it.

Discuss escalation clause strategy. If you end up in a competitive situation, do you want to use one? What is your ceiling? Have this conversation in advance.

Use the **Offer Preparation Checklist** at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) when you are ready to move on a specific home. It walks through earnest money decisions, contingency review, pre-approval letter confirmation, comparable review, timeline considerations, and strong versus weak offer elements. Work through it before you submit anything.

Then trust your agent's read on the specific situation. Strategy that works in the abstract sometimes needs adjustment based on what they know about the seller, the listing agent, and the competitive landscape at the moment of the offer.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Buyers who prepare their offer strategy before they need it do not panic when the moment arrives.

They know what they are willing to do and what they are not. They have thought through the contingency questions. They have discussed escalation. They know their earnest money position. When their agent calls to say the home just got another offer, the response is a decision, not a scramble.

That composure is not just good for your stress level. It is good for the outcome. Panicked buyers make concessions they did not plan to make. Prepared buyers make the offer they decided to make and let it stand.

*The right home will come. Be ready for it.*

## CHAPTER 11 RESOURCES

### OFFER PREPARATION CHECKLIST

Structured checklist to review financing, contingencies, timing, and key offer terms before writing an offer.

*[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

*All chapter resources: [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

## CHAPTER 12

# Contract to Close

## What Actually Happens After You Say Yes

Your offer was accepted. Congratulations. Now comes the stage most buyers feel most anxious about, not because anything is wrong, but because no one explained what normal looks like.

*Going under contract  
is not the finish line.*

*It is the beginning  
of the final phase.*

### THE REALITY

Going under contract is not the finish line. It is the beginning of the final phase. Once the seller accepts your offer, the property is considered under contract, meaning both parties have agreed to move forward under the terms of the purchase agreement.

Most of the stress buyers feel between accepted offer and closing comes from not knowing what is supposed to happen next. An inspection report comes back with a list of findings and the buyer panics because they did not know that every inspection report comes back with a list of findings. An appraisal takes longer than expected and the buyer assumes something is wrong, not knowing that the timeline is completely standard.

When you understand what normal looks like, the process stops feeling threatening. Issues that arise, and some always do, stop feeling like signs that the deal is falling apart. They start feeling like exactly what they are: the process working as designed.

Before we get into the mechanics of this phase, let me show you how easily small details in a contract can turn into very large consequences.

In Chapter 2, I mentioned the roof situation. A buyer under contract. The seller's response to the inspection finding that the roof needed attention was a promise to submit a claim to their insurance company to make the necessary repairs.

That promise, as written, was essentially unenforceable. An insurance company can deny a claim. Repairs can be delayed. A vague reference to submitting a claim gave the buyer no real protection for what was potentially a very expensive item.

I caught it. I rewrote the contract language to require a new roof, guaranteed, regardless of what the insurance company decided. The seller's insurance status became irrelevant. The buyer was getting a new roof or the deal did not close on those terms.

That change mattered. The insurance company ultimately paid only part of the claim because of the roof's age. The seller had to cover the remaining cost and their deductible to fulfill the contract terms.

Tens of thousands of dollars. Protected. Because someone was paying close attention to the language in a document most buyers would have signed without realizing what was missing.

The contract-to-close phase is where experience stops being abstract and becomes measurable. It is where the value of having the right representation becomes visible. And it is where buyers who prepared avoid the expensive surprises that catch unprepared buyers off guard.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### The Inspection

Every home has a list.

That is not a pessimistic statement. It is the most reassuring thing I can tell you about inspections. A home inspection report is not a verdict on whether a home is good or bad. It is a comprehensive document of every observable condition in the property, from minor maintenance items to major system issues. The list always has things on it. An inspection report with no findings would mean the inspector was not doing their job.

Your job, with your agent's guidance, is to sort that list.

Major systems and safety concerns go to the top. Structural items, roof condition, HVAC function, electrical safety, plumbing integrity. These protect both the investment and the people living in it. These are the issues worth negotiating.

Maintenance items and cosmetic conditions go to the bottom. The seller has lived in this home. They are not required to deliver it in perfect condition. Trying to negotiate every item on an inspection report is one of the fastest ways to derail a transaction over things that do not materially affect the home.

In Colorado, a thorough inspection package usually includes a general home inspection, a sewer scope, and a radon test. We introduced this cost range in Chapter 7. Expect to pay roughly \$600 to \$900 for all three. That investment tells you what you are buying before you are committed to buying it.

The inspection objection period in Colorado is typically the first ten days or so after contract. During that window, you can submit a written request for repairs, credits, or price adjustments based on inspection findings. The seller can agree, counter, or decline. If resolution cannot be reached, you can typically exit the contract and recover your earnest money. Your agent manages this negotiation.

Approach inspections as information gathering, not as a pass-fail test. The home that passes all three inspections without a single finding does not exist. The home where the findings are manageable and the seller is reasonable is the one to buy.

## **INSPECTION REALITY**

Every inspection report comes back with a list. The older the home, the longer that list is likely to be.

Homes age.

Systems wear out.

Building codes evolve.

Inspectors document everything they observe.

A long inspection report is not a sign something is wrong. It is a sign the inspector is doing their job.

The goal is not to find a perfect house.

The goal is to understand the one you are buying.

When it comes time to request repairs, keep the focus on the items that matter. Safety issues, structural concerns, or major systems that are not functioning as designed deserve attention. Smaller items, like a \$65 GFCI outlet or a loose hinge, should not be the reason a \$500,000 transaction falls apart.

If a system is functioning as designed, the seller is generally not obligated to replace it simply because it is older. An HVAC system nearing the end of its expected lifespan will eventually need replacement, but that is a future maintenance cost, not necessarily a repair required today.

For situations like that, some buyers request a home warranty to help cover potential repair costs during the first year. Your agent can help determine which issues are worth negotiating and which ones are better addressed after closing.

If the property is in an HOA, you will also receive the association documents to review. Colorado buyers have the right to review these documents and terminate the contract if something in the HOA rules, finances, or restrictions does not work for them.

I have seen many transactions fall apart during inspections. Not because the home was a bad fit, but because buyers were unprepared for what a real inspection report looks like or expected a used home to perform like a new one. An inspection report will always have a list. That is normal. The seller is not selling you a brand-new home, and the goal of the inspection is not to eliminate every imperfection. It is to understand the condition of the property and address the items that truly matter. And for perspective, even brand-new homes have inspection lists. Prepared buyers understand that. Surprised buyers struggle with it.

## **The Appraisal**

Your lender orders an appraisal after you are under contract. An independent licensed appraiser visits the home, evaluates it against comparable recent sales in the area, and delivers a value determination to the lender.

The appraisal exists to protect both you and the lender. The lender will not loan you more than a property is worth. The appraisal is how they verify that the purchase price is supported by the market.

Most appraisals come in at or above value. When one comes in below the purchase price, it does not automatically end the transaction. There are options. The seller can reduce the price to the appraised value. The buyer can pay the difference in cash if they have the funds and choose to do so. The parties can meet somewhere in the middle. Or the transaction can be restructured in another way. Your agent manages this negotiation if and when it arises.

The timeline for an appraisal is typically one to three weeks after it is ordered. It is often delayed until after all inspection matters are resolved, depending on your closing timeline. Waiting for the appraisal result is a normal part of the process, not a sign of a problem.

## **Metro Districts: The Full Explanation**

We introduced metro districts in Chapter 6. They come up again here because they are a meaningful part of the closing picture in many Denver Metro transactions and every buyer should understand them completely before they close.

A metropolitan district is a special taxing district created to finance the infrastructure needed to develop raw land into a livable community. Roads, utilities, parks, recreation facilities, community features. The developer borrowed money to build those things and the metro district is the mechanism by which homeowners within the district repay that debt over time through assessments on their property.

Metro district assessments are not optional. They are attached to the home, not the owner. They do not go away when you move in. They are a legal obligation that transfers with ownership.

Metro districts also vary significantly. Some carry relatively modest fees, while others add several hundred dollars per month to the cost of ownership. Before closing on any home in the Denver Metro, particularly in newer communities in the outer suburbs, you should understand the metro district structure, including the current assessments, when they may change, and the projected repayment timeline.

Metro districts are often structured to repay infrastructure debt over roughly thirty years. In theory, those taxes may decrease once the debt is paid off. In practice, many districts continue beyond their original timelines as additional borrowing or refinancing occurs while communities are still developing. Because of that, buyers should view metro district taxes as a long-term cost of ownership rather than planning on them disappearing on a specific date.

Your agent and your title company will both provide metro district disclosure documentation during the contract period. Read it. Ask questions about it. Understand what you are committing to.

## The Final Walkthrough

The final walkthrough usually happens one to two days before closing. It is not a second inspection. It is verification.

There are three things to confirm during the final walkthrough.

### **First: agreed repairs have been completed.**

If the seller agreed to address specific items from the inspection, verify that the work was actually done and completed to a reasonable standard. Bring your inspection report and the written inspection resolution so you can compare what was agreed to with what was completed.

### **Second: included items are still present.**

Anything listed in the contract as included in the sale—appliances, window treatments, or fixtures specifically identified—should still be in the home. Occasionally sellers take something they agreed to leave. The walkthrough is when you catch it.

### **Third: the home is in the condition you expected.**

There should be no new damage from the move-out and no new issues that were not present during your inspection. The home should look essentially the same as it did when you agreed to purchase it.

It is also a good moment to briefly turn on major systems and appliances to confirm everything is operational.

If something is wrong at the walkthrough, your agent handles it. Closing does not move forward until the issue is resolved or you have agreed to a credit or adjustment that makes you whole.

Before closing, use the **Final Walkthrough Checklist** available at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) to verify repairs, confirm the home's condition, and ensure included items are still present before signing final documents.

## Closing Day

Closing day is usually calmer than buyers expect.

The reason it feels calm is that every major decision has already been made. The inspection was resolved. The appraisal came in. The loan was approved. The final numbers were confirmed with the title company.

At least three business days before closing you will receive a document called the **Closing Disclosure**, which confirms your final loan terms and the exact amount you will bring to closing.

By the time you are sitting at the closing table, you are simply executing a plan that is already complete.

What to bring: a government-issued photo ID. Your funds should be transferred in advance according to the title company's instructions.

Wire transfer details will come directly from the title company. Do not wire money based on instructions that arrive in an unexpected email. If anything looks unusual, verify the instructions by calling the title company directly.

Title insurance protects you and your lender against ownership claims or legal issues tied to the property's past.

At the table, you will sign a significant amount of paperwork. Your agent will be there, and the title company closing officer will walk you through the documents. You do not need to memorize anything. Simply ask questions about anything you do not understand.

Then you get the keys.

The **Closing Day Checklist** at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) walks you through what to bring and what to verify before signing.

## **Your First Days as a Homeowner**

The first week in a newhome comes with a learning curve. Give yourself grace for it.

### **Change the locks.**

You do not know whomay still have a key. This is the first thing to do, not an eventual thing.

### **Confirm utilities are setup.**

Water, gas, electric, internet. Make sure the accounts are in your name and everything is functioning.

### **Store your closing documents safely.**

Store your closing documents safely.

Keep both a physical copy and a digital backup. These documents are proof of ownership and contain information you may need for taxes, insurance claims, or future refinancing. In many Colorado communities with shared mailbox stands, you may need to bring a copy of your recorded deed to the post office or mailbox management office to register as the new owner and obtain your mailbox key.

### **Locate and learn your home systems.**

Find the main water shutoff. Locate the electrical panel and learn which breakers control which areas of the home. Find the furnace filter and understand the maintenance schedule. Locate the water heater and know how to adjust the temperature.

These are not glamorous tasks, but they are the difference between a homeowner who understands their home and one who is surprised by it later.

The **Post-Closing Homeowner Checklist** at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com) provides a simple roadmap for the first days and weeks of ownership.

## Why Local Knowledge Matters

First-time buyers in the DenverMetro who understand how this market works have real advantages over buyers relying only on general advice.

Seasonal timing matters here. Spring and early summer typically bring the most competition. Buyers who are prepared to move in late winter or fall often encounter less competition and more motivated sellers. Knowing when to look, not just what to look for, can change the outcome of a purchase.

Price points and neighborhood dynamics vary dramatically across the metro area. What \$400,000 buys in one community may be completely different from what it buys in another, not just in square footage but in build quality, infrastructure, and long-term value patterns. Understanding those differences is part of the strategy.

Relationships also matter in ways buyers do not always see. Builder relationships can create opportunities that never reach the public market. Incentive windows open and close quickly. Pricing can shift depending on timing, inventory levels, and who is representing the buyer. These outcomes are rarely accidental. They are usually the result of preparation and the right relationships already being in place.

That is why local knowledge and experience matter so much in the final stages of the process.

## WHAT TO DO NEXT

### Typical Colorado Contract-to-Close Timeline (30–45 Days)

Most Colorado purchase contracts are written with a 30–45 day closing timeline. The sequence below shows how the major steps typically unfold.

Review the timeline before your offer is accepted so you know exactly what is coming. After you go under contract, identify which stage feels most uncertain to you and read that section of this chapter again with fresh attention.

**Note:**

*Timelines vary by transaction. Some purchases close faster, particularly cash transactions. The following is a representative guide, not a guarantee.*

DAYS	WHAT HAPPENS
<b>Days 1–3</b>	Contract signed. Earnest money deposited. Inspection scheduled.
<b>Days 3–10</b>	Inspection period. General inspection, sewer scope, and radon test completed. Inspection objection submitted if needed.
<b>Days 10–14</b>	Inspection resolution period. Seller responds and negotiations completed. Appraisal is typically ordered after inspection resolution, though in tighter time-
<b>Days 7–14</b>	Appraisal completed and reviewed. If value comes in low, resolution options discussed.
<b>Days 21–30</b>	Loan final approval and underwriting. Buyer provides any final documents requested.
<b>Days 28–32</b>	Clear to Close received. Final numbers confirmed with title company.
<b>Days 30–35</b>	Final walkthrough. Verify agreed repairs, confirm condition, check included items.
<b>Days 30–45</b>	Closing day. Documents signed at title company. Funds transferred and keys released.

Download the **Final Walk-Through Checklist** and the **Closing Day Checklist** from [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com). Have them ready when you need them.

Download the **Buyers Post-Closing Checklist** as well. It covers Day 1, Week 1, Month 1, and Year 1 milestones. The first year of homeownership has its own learning curve and having a roadmap for it makes the transition smoother.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

You close on a home you understand, with numbers you verified, using a process you followed from the beginning.

Not every transaction is smooth. There are almost always moments between accepted offer and closing where something requires attention. An inspection finding to negotiate. A document the underwriter needs. A timeline that needs adjusting. Those moments are normal. They are not emergencies.

When you have been through this system, those moments feel different than they do for unprepared buyers. You have context. You have an agent who is managing the details. You have a framework that tells you what is normal and what actually requires concern.

The stress is in the middle. Not at the end.

Closing day itself, for buyers who did the work, is almost anticlimactic. You sign the documents. You get the keys. You walk into your home.

And the roof story from Chapter 2 is the reason you walk in knowing your investment is protected. Not hoping it is. Knowing it.

### **That is what the Key Ready System builds.**

From confused and stuck to confident and prepared. From reactive buyer to strategic one. From waiting for the right time to moving with a plan.

*You did the work. You are ready.*

## **CHAPTER 12 RESOURCES**

### **FINAL WALKTHROUGH CHECKLIST**

Verify repairs, confirm included items, and ensure the home's condition before closing.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### **CLOSING DAY CHECKLIST**

What to bring, what to verify, and how to safely transfer funds on closing day.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

### **BUYER POST CLOSING CHECKLIST**

Step-by-step guide for the first days, weeks, and months after moving into your home.

*buyer.carliplummer.com*

*All chapter resources: **buyer.carliplummer.com***

## BUYER TOOLS & CHECKLISTS

All tools and checklists referenced throughout this book are available at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **HOMEBUYER READINESS INDEX™**

10-question assessment that evaluates emotional, financial, and informational readiness for homeownership.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **HOME PAYMENT COMFORT INDEX™**

Interactive tool that helps you determine a monthly payment range that fits your lifestyle and financial goals.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **THREE BUCKETS™ UPFRONT COST PLANNER**

Calculator that estimates down payment, closing costs, and upfront expenses so you can plan your savings timeline.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **WANTS VS. NEEDS WORKSHEET**

Helps clarify non-negotiables and rank home features by priority before beginning your search.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **OFFER PREPARATION CHECKLIST**

Checklist to review financing, contingencies, timing, and key offer terms before submitting an offer.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **NEW CONSTRUCTION CHECKLIST**

Questions to ask before visiting a builder, negotiation opportunities, upgrade decisions, and metro district review.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **FINAL WALKTHROUGH CHECKLIST**

Verify repairs, confirm included items, and ensure the home's condition before closing.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **CLOSING DAY CHECKLIST**

What to bring, what to verify, and how to safely transfer funds on closing day.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

### **POST-CLOSING HOMEOWNER CHECKLIST**

Step-by-step guide for the first days, weeks, and months after moving into your home.

[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)

*All chapter resources: [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)*

## YOU'RE KEY READY

# YOUR NEXT 4 STEPS

## Making the Move to Home

You made it through the entire Key Ready System.

Every step. Every chapter. Every concept that most first-time buyers never encounter until they are already in the middle of the process and wishing someone had explained it sooner.

You now understand the process better than most people who have already bought a home.

That is not a small thing. That is the whole point.

You came in with questions, assumptions, and maybe a fear or two. You are leaving with a framework, a vocabulary, and a clear picture of exactly what comes next. The path from where you are to holding the keys to your first home is not a mystery anymore. It is a sequence. And you know the sequence.

**Here is what to do next, in order.**

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### **Step 1: Take the Homebuyer Readiness Index™**

Get your personalized readiness score across all 8 Key Ready System™ dimensions.

Ten questions. Scored results. Delivered to your email.

The Snapshot in Chapter 3 gave you a private picture. The Homebuyer Readiness Index gives you a formal score with a specific readiness tier. It tells you exactly where you stand, which areas are ready to move, and where to focus next.

*Find it at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com).*

### **Step 2: Find Your Comfort Number**

The Home Payment Comfort Index™ separates the lender's number from yours.

You learned in Chapter 6 that the approval amount and the right amount are two different things. The Comfort Index puts a scored tier to that distinction. Ten questions. Delivered to your email.

*Find it at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com).*

## Step 3: Download Your Chapter Resources

Every checklist, tool, and guide referenced in this book lives at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com).

One email entry unlocks everything. Every resource organized by stage of the buying journey so you can find what you need when you need it, whether you are just starting or further along in the buying process.

## Step 4: Connect with Carli

No pressure. No pitch. Just a conversation about where you are and what your plan looks like.

You have done the reading. You have done the thinking. The next step is a real conversation with someone who knows this market, has guided buyers at every starting point through this system, whose job it is to help you move forward with a home and a payment that truly fits your life.

*Schedule when you are ready at [buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com).*

*Or Scan this QR Code:*



## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

# Turning Preparation Into a Real Plan

If you have made it this far, you already know more about the homebuying process than most first-time buyers.

You understand how readiness actually works.

You know what lenders look for.

You know what your real numbers look like.

And you know the difference between browsing homes and preparing to buy one.

That preparation changes everything.

When buyers reach this point, they usually find themselves in one of three places.

Some are ready to start the search and want guidance through the next steps.

Some are close but still have a few pieces to line up, such as credit improvements, savings goals, or timing decisions.

And some simply want a clear conversation about their situation so they can decide what the right next move looks like.

All three are completely normal.

If you would like help turning what you learned in this book into a real plan, the next step is simple.

Visit: **[buyer.carliplummer.com](http://buyer.carliplummer.com)**

There you will find:

- The Homebuyer Readiness Index™
- The Three Buckets Upfront Cost Planner™
- The Home Payment Comfort Index™
- The Homebuying Process Roadmap
- Lender and preparation resources

You can also request a **Buyer Strategy Session**, where we look at your numbers, timeline, and goals together and map out your next steps.

No pressure. No obligation. Just clarity.

Buying a home is one of the biggest financial decisions most people make. You deserve guidance that helps you move forward with confidence.

And when you are ready, I would be honored to help you open the door.

Carli Plummer

## KEY VIP CLUB

### Where Clients Become Lifetime VIPs

*KEY VIP Club membership is reserved for clients who complete a home purchase with Carli Plummer. It is not available to general readers. It is not unlocked by registering at the website or completing the Readiness Index. It is earned. You earn it by working with Carli through the process this book describes and closing on your home.*

#### **This is the destination.**

The certificate and welcome letter are presented at closing as a tangible acknowledgment of what you accomplished. Not just buying a house. Doing it prepared, strategic, and with the right team behind you.

#### **As a KEY VIP member, here is what you receive:**

- The complete Buyer Tips and Checklists booklet, every tool from this book plus the full post-closing toolkit, assembled in one place.
- A Moving Checklist covering two months of preparation through moving day, including a packing guide for the boxes you open first.
- A Change of Address Checklist covering finances, insurance, home services, memberships, and government agencies. Every account you need to update in one organized document.
- A Utility Providers reference sheet for your new home.
- Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter Home Maintenance Checklists to protect your investment year-round.
- An annual equity assessment from Carli so you always know what your investment is doing and what your options are as your equity grows.
- Access to client-only events and ongoing homeowner education.
- Priority access for future moves and referrals.
- The KEY VIP Club certificate, presented at closing.

*KEY VIP benefits evolve and are offered exclusively to active clients and referrals.*

***This relationship does not end at closing. It continues.***



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### CARLIPLUMMER

Carli Plummer is a real estate professional and first-time homebuyer specialist serving the Denver Metro market since 2018. Before real estate, she spent more than twenty years in corporate America leading high-performing teams, negotiating complex outcomes, and managing high-stakes processes under pressure. She brought those skills with her when she transitioned into buyer representation, and her clients feel the difference.

Carli specializes in first-time buyers because she understands what it costs to go through the process without the right guidance. She purchased multiple homes before developing the framework she now teaches, and the mistakes she made along the way are exactly why she built the **Key Ready System™**. Her clients do not have to repeat those mistakes.

Beyond real estate, Carli serves as a Commerce City Senior Commissioner and is active in church ministry. She is a wife, mother, grandmother of nine, and great-grandmother of three. A Midwest native who moved from Hawaii to Colorado, she built a new life here with her husband of nearly twenty-five years and has never looked back.

She is guided by purpose and driven by excellence. Her standard is not what the industry expects. It is what her clients deserve.

*Carli lives in Commerce City, Colorado, where she is deeply rooted in the community she serves.*

**Real talk. Real help. No pressure.**

**Carli Plummer**

*Your RE Lady. Your RE Resource.*

*Your First-Time Homebuyer Specialist.*

*Colorado Homes by Carli|Key Team Real Estate*