
ERICA C. JAMES, REALTOR

JOINT COMMAND REALTY

First-Time Buyer Guide

Northern Virginia & Maryland

What to know before you start touring homes

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The buying process, step by step

Buying a home follows a predictable path. Knowing the steps ahead of time keeps you calm and in control:

- Get pre-approved: a lender reviews your finances and tells you what you can borrow. A pre-approval letter makes your offer stronger.
- Define your priorities: budget, commute, space, timeline. Write down your must-haves and nice-to-haves before you tour.
- Tour homes: visit in person when you can. Take notes and photos - after five houses, they blur together.
- Make an offer: your agent prepares the offer with price, contingencies, and timeline.
- Inspection & appraisal: a home inspection checks the property's condition; the appraisal confirms value for your lender.
- Closing: you sign the final paperwork, funds transfer, and you get the keys.

Money: what to budget for

Beyond your down payment, plan for closing costs - lender fees, title work, prepaid taxes and insurance. Your lender's Loan Estimate itemizes these, so review it carefully and ask questions about anything unclear.

- Keep your finances steady during the process: avoid large purchases or new credit accounts between pre-approval and closing.
- Ask your lender about first-time buyer loan programs you may qualify for.

Touring like a pro

- Visit at different times of day when possible - traffic and noise change.
- Test the commute from the home to work during rush hour, not just on a map.
- Look past staging: check water pressure, outlets, windows, and storage.
- For school information, use published sources like state report cards and district websites, and verify attendance boundaries with the district directly.

Making an offer

A strong offer is about more than price. Terms like the closing timeline, earnest money deposit, and contingencies (inspection, appraisal, financing) all matter to a seller. Your agent will walk you through recent comparable sales so your offer is grounded in real market data - not guesswork.

Inspection, appraisal & closing

The inspection is your chance to learn the home's true condition. Your inspector's report helps you decide whether to move forward, negotiate repairs, or walk away.

The appraisal protects both you and your lender by confirming the home's market value. If it comes in low, you have options - your agent will lay them out clearly.

At closing you'll sign the final documents, closing costs are settled, and ownership transfers to you. Bring a photo ID and be ready to review every page.

Ready to talk it through?

Call or text anytime. There is no cost and no pressure - just a straightforward conversation about your goals and a clear plan for your next step.

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