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Meet the neighbors driving residential sales



Ave Maria tallied 38 fresh home purchases in May. SUBMITTED

Buyers seek out ‘non-previously sneezed in’ homes



In the Know

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Naples Daily News

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As the pandemic rages on, you can’t miss the out of place bright gold New York and drab yellow New Jersey license plates in Southwest Florida traffic.

A Pew Research Center study released this past week found that 3% of U.S. adults have moved permanently or temporarily due to the COVID-19 crisis. That would translate to 7.7 million Americans, not counting the kids, on the move.

Florida, including Sarasota, Collier and Lee counties, served as a top draw for Big Apple residents, based on the U.S. Post Office’s 137,000 March and April mail forwarding requests analyzed by The New York Times.

In addition, Times’ cell phone data shows about 420,000 people left Gotham between March 1 and

May 1, and many headed to the Sunshine State.

And while a large number of them broke the snowbird rule of staying here well past the established Easter exodus, they’ve been helping drive residential sales, often preferring new over existing. In this age of coronavirus, might be a touch of mysophobia that NPR says has been exhibited by other native New Yorkers such as Howard Stern, Donald Trump and the Seinfeld TV character.

“When we spoke to some home builders here

lately I heard the term, buyers are preferring a ‘non-previously sneezed in home,’” said Justin Thibaut, president of LSI Companies, a major Southwest Florida real estate broker, with a focus on both vacant land and developed home sites and communities. “There’s

definitely going to be a trend toward newer

product versus existing, mostly just because of the psychological element of, ‘Hey, somebody was living in here’ versus ‘Hey, this is brand new, and no one’s



A rendering of a New York license plate. COURTESY OF NYS DMV

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Founder's Square is the heart of Babcock Ranch with shops, restaurants and outdoor seating.

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In the Know

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ever been in here before, and you don't have to worry about that.' That's certainly something on home buyers' minds right now."

Scientific data suggests chances are infinitesimal that anyone might get coronavirus from sitting on a toilet, turning a doorknob or leaning on a kitchen counter used by the previous resident. And there's no evidence it's less safe than a sparkly domicile built by an array of construction workers inside and outside.

Yes, the National Institutes of Health has concluded the virus that causes COVID-19 can live up to four hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to three days on stainless steel and plastic. Heard of Lysol? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not documented transmission from a surface to a human.

But for a few house hunters, it's like coming across yellow police tape in the kitchen and seeing crime scene chalk outlining a motionless body on the 1970s vinyl flooring. Yeah, that vinyl sure is a turnoff.

"It's perception when it comes to people buying a home. There's a lot of emotion involved," Thibaut said. "It's very emotionally charged and emotionally driven, and when it's your home-stead, and where you're going to be spending all your time, people are looking at that a little more closely."

Perhaps able to recall that new house smell, buyers, especially from out of area, didn't necessarily visit construction sites or models in-person before purchasing.

"When we're speaking with many of the home builders around here, most of them are reporting that in the month of May they sold more homes this May than they did last May. That's interesting because a lot of those were done with virtual tours and not necessarily, hands-on sales techniques like we're used to," Thibaut said late last month. "It has to be a little bit of the flight factor, whether it's from out of state or even intra-state, coming from Miami and Tampa and some of the more densely populated areas to the areas where they feel like they can get out and away from people a little easier."

That might help explain what is happening in the sprouting towns of Babcock Ranch off State Road 31 at the Lee/Charlotte county line and Ave Maria in eastern Collier County. Their new sales during the pandemic are outpacing last year's bigly economy, believe me, while older homes in most spots went into a bit of stall although now starting to pick up again.

Solar-powered Babcock, which residents began inhabiting in 2018, exceeded 600 total sales since its debut, according to a mid-April report. And then by June, it topped 700.

Ave Maria tallied 38 fresh purchases in May, its best month since the master planned community appeared in 2007. The community is up 35%, year over year.

"We are seeing Ave Maria's hometown feel and community-minded focus attract shoppers and buyers of new homes from all over the country," said Andrea McLendon, marketing director for Barron Collier Companies.

What part of the motherland? "We continue to see buyers from several areas including Collier County, South Florida and the Northeast," said Cee Cee Marinelli, director of development for Ave Maria.

National brokerage Redfin has found that online searches for housing in small towns are growing at nearly twice the rate as queries for major metropolitan areas. Two million New Yorkers could eventually leave their state for good, according to The Hill newspaper.

"We have seen a demand for more rural properties - people want space, acreage," said Billy Nash, a luxury Realtor for Illustrated Properties, which has offices



Aaron Foster, owner of the new Food & Drink in Midtown Reno, also is a successful license plate artist; this piece hangs in the restaurant. JOHNATHAN L. WRIGHT/RGJ

“Northerners living in lockdowns all year have had enough and are buying down here (and) saying if they ever go through something like this again, it will be full-time in Florida.”

Frank Kupiec
Naples LandQwest broker, a Chicago native

in Naples and Palm Beach. "It will evolve so you don't have to be in the big cities anymore. People want more land."

Besides in cities, Illustrated sells in the more rustic areas of eastern Collier, Okeechobee and Polk counties and the Burnt Store Road corridor of Lee and Charlotte. Nash told CBS the transition during the COVID-19 quandary has been made easier as businesses, saving on expensive urban office space and keeping staff safe, increasingly allow employees to work remotely. And the weather and lack of state tax help draw the migration to Florida.

"Northerners living in lockdowns all year have had enough and are buying down here (and) saying if they ever go through something like this again, it will be full-time in Florida," said Chicago native Frank Kupiec, a Naples LandQwest broker who has closed more than \$750 million in real estate and business transactions since 1995. "They're not coming here to bunker down, but rather to be out and about."

The hankering to be outside by locals and northern visitors alike during the pandemic spurred golf cart traffic jams on courses throughout Southwest Florida, where they never closed. For example, Englewood's Boca Royale, where Neal Communities develops, has seen a 44 percent increase in public play as of June, year to date over 2019.

Could that mean an upswing in golf course communities?

"The discussion there heads toward access to those types of things and proximity to those versus I don't anticipate there being a surge where a bunch of golf courses are going to be built. I think, just like you touched on, we have a surplus of that type of development," Thibaut said. "It's people wanting to come to areas like this to be close to that so they have something to do in the event something like this occurs. (Maybe) they didn't consider living on a golf course previously - but now it looks a

lot more attractive. Because if they get into a point where they're quarantined, they've got open space to look at."

With social distancing and other factors, the enduring enthusiasm for high density metro life seen around the nation, with easily managed tight living spaces and packed mass transportation, has been evaporating.

"That's another trend we'll see, and have already started to hear about, especially from the custom builders in our market. (The current crisis is) changing the way that people look at their home and wanting a little bit more of a space," Thibaut said. "If this is something that continues and continues to occur, it becomes a lot more attractive to have some space in your home than to be stuck in an 1,100-square-foot apartment."

In the Pew analysis I referenced earlier, the largest percentage, by far, to move due to coronavirus, was adults, ages 18-29. Nine percent of them in America.

Prior to our country's current mess, studies had showed the younger set generally more interested in global travel than the basic four walls where they happened to sleep, figuring they wouldn't be home much.

That matched up with the local housing "revolution" of cargo container homes and other types of simplistic dwellings Thibaut's firm had been projecting during February's Market Watch 2020 held by the News-Press.

"We started to see and discussed quite extensively a trend where the homes built by quite a few Baby Boomers in the early 2000s were not as appealing to the millennial and Gen Z generations because they were big," Thibaut said, thinking that could change.

It's become a different world where Americans are trapped within their borders, pretty much banned on the rest of the planet. Unlike nearly every other nation, the virus continues to spread at a high rate on our shores as the death toll rises and hospital beds fill up unabated.

Voyaging abroad may be limited for a long time. Forbes magazine recently wrote that it now expects more millennials who can afford it to move away from rented apartments and uncomfortably crowded elevators to larger spaces that include a home office.

Indeed, LSI's 10th annual Market Trends program, held virtually at 4 p.m. Aug. 11 in conjunction with the Collier and Lee building industry associations, may be a bit different than its report only six short months ago. Also free, the Florida CCIM Chapter Southwest District is hosting its Midyear Market



Narrative Coffee Roasters roasts high quality, single-origin beans in Cape Coral.

FACEBOOK.COM/PG/NARRATIVECOFFEEROASTERS

Watch in a 4:30 p.m. Wednesday web-cast.

A little coffee with Tuesday town hall

Y'all know how I go on and on about my love for *café cubano*. Another option is arriving at Mercato in Naples, as Narrative Coffee Roasters makes its brick and mortar debut and operates 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

"We opened June 4, and turnout since then has truly exceeded our expectations," said co-owner William Diaz-Garcia II, a local attorney and *hermano* with Tampa roots. "We are extending to evening hours starting later this month and will be adding authentic Cuban coffee selections to our menu as well."

With numerous techniques available for your brew or tea, the bill of fare already highlights favorites inspired by the island nation, such as guava pastries and *dulce de leche* rolls.

Narrative features 2,100 square feet, including 800 of it featuring outside lounge and seating space, just in time for a pandemic.

Based in Cape Coral, Narrative has been roasting java for more than three years for area restaurants and for its own pop-ups.

As he worked on plans in 2019 for the shop, co-owner Caleb MacPherson said the idea was to serve every level of aficionados: "Fun" coffee for beginners, "rich" versions for longtime veterans.

"We're going to keep true to what we've been doing, highlighting natural flavors," he said.

By the way, hear from merchants like MacPherson and other regional economic leaders at a Tuesday digital gathering hosted by our newspapers and WGCU Public Media and called Open For Business — A Coronavirus Virtual Town Hall.

As I referenced in a column last week, the goliaths of retails keep a-tumbling, which may create opportunities for enterprising locals who can adapt more quickly in our rapidly changing environment.

The 8 p.m. interactive event will stream on multiple platforms, simulcast on WGCU TV and radio and be available to watch on The News-Press and Naples Daily News Facebook pages. A live question and answer session will follow at 9 p.m. on Facebook with our experts.

Based at the Naples Daily News, Columnist Phil Fernandez (pfernandez@gannett.com) writes In the Know as part of the USA TODAY NETWORK.