

WOOD ACRES!

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

April, 2009

Dear Wood Acres Area Resident,

Can you see it? That faint, flickering light at the end of the tunnel? I would swear that I catch a glimpse every now and then. Evidence? House are selling. In Wood Acres alone, there have been five sales since my newsletter in January. There have been four homes sell over a million dollars in Sumner in the last few months, six sales in Glen Echo Heights, five sales over a million dollars in Westmoreland Hills. There have been 21 settled transaction in 2009 in our zip code already and another 29 sales pending. This is all good news.



In short, the market is slowly but surely improving. Yes, prices are down a bit from where they were. Your house is worth a bit less than it was six months ago, but nothing like the crushing losses reported in parts of the country such as California, Florida and Nevada. These tales of doom make for entertaining news stories but have precious little to do with our immediate concerns in the Bethesda area. Check out the following “evidence”:

		<u>Orig Price / Last price</u>	<u>Final Sales Price</u>
	*Stuart & Maury sales		
1)	5901 Cranston Rd.	\$996,000	Pending
2)	5925 Gloster Rd.	\$949,000 / \$875,000	Pending
3)	5908 Harwick Rd.*	\$869,000	Pending
4)	6010 Cobalt Rd.*	\$795,000	Pending
5)	6205 Mass. Ave.	\$795,000 / \$699,900	Pending
6)	6318 Avalon Dr.*	\$768,500 / \$739,000	\$730,000

The sale of Cranston above, which is a 4BR/3BA house on the second floor attracted several offers. This was very encouraging. The three homes above that were reduced in price prior to finally getting a contract are an indication that initial pricing continues to be critical to marketing success. Once a house, no matter how good a home it is, does not sell quickly, the 101st person through the door begins to doubt their own judgment. “Why am I the only person who wants this place?” seems to go through their mind. I consider the Gloster house above to be one of the more exceptional homes to come on the market in years. Both the interior condition of that home and the exterior hardscape improvements were simply superb. Someone got a really, really good house for the money.

My listing on Cobalt Rd. has been purchased by a couple who are planning a two-story addition. That Cobalt lot, at 9200 sq. ft., is larger than most in Wood Acres and totally flat. I spent about six months helping the owner restore and renovate the home prior to going on the market and was keenly aware that the eventual next buyer might well want to build an addition on the back of the home. It will be fun to see their vision become reality. You might think that the troubled economic times would be dampening enthusiasm for major additions in Wood Acres, but rising around us are gorgeous additions on Gloster, Welborn and Milo at this writing. Life goes on!

As I mentioned in the January newsletter, I'd like to commence a discussion regarding how to create lasting property value and how to help you defend your equity in these challenging times. I realize that the following discussion is detailed, and may be considered a bit dry by the casual reader, but the information should prove useful if you can hang with me!

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

It's also important to recognize that your home is an investment, perhaps the biggest one you will ever make. Protecting that investment is critical. Especially in today's economic environment. You can't make interest rates go down or the stock market go up, but you **can** take reasonable steps to make your home as valuable as possible. Some of this takes money, but some aspects of protecting value involve elbow grease, creativity and an intense pride of ownership. I don't claim to have all the answers on how this is achieved, but I have shown thousands of houses in my 29-year career. You learn something about how people react, what their hot buttons are, and the elements that make someone say, "Wow, I like this house." We should all try to achieve the collective mindset that the appearance of Woodacres Park, the Triangle, lower Ramsgate along the creek, sidewalks, trees, and the condition of our homes *matters*. We can stand out as a community and make an impression. In the Spring, I would like to spearhead a renewed effort to beautify our common areas and inspire continued stellar maintenance of all Wood Acres homes. Together, we can do this and it will help us defend value in our community.

Let's start with the outside of the home. One man's finely manicured grounds, meticulous defined planting areas and perfect lush green grass is another man's environmental nightmare. I take care of my own lawn and love working out there. Because of the dog, we try really hard not to use chemicals and when we do, they are the most environmentally friendly we can find to get the job done. Having said all that, when I pull up with a buyer to a house, the first impression can be a lasting one. Does it look exceptionally well cared for? Landscaping is a part of this equation. A healthy lawn and plantings make a positive impression. Foundation plantings should seldom rise above the bottom of the front windows. I know some people like the privacy, if so, I would suggest what are called "soft-lites" which are thin shades that let in the sun but cannot be seen through. Privacy should not be achieved on the front of the house through the use of bushes. Police departments will tell you that an overgrown appearance shields neighbors from noticing suspicious activity. You are safer with the bushes brought down. It could be argued that an exception to this observation would be homes facing a busy street.

Bushes and trees should be well-trimmed and appropriately sized for their specimen. If you look carefully, you may notice that some houses have enormous trees and bushes on the front corners of their property. More than likely, these are original modest plantings of the builder, all grown up! I have photos of “new” Wood Acres homes from the ‘40’s and the landscaping package included tiny bushes on the corners. Well, they all grew up over 40-60 years, it’s now possible that they overpower the home at this point. A careful review with an arborist might be worth considering.

Trees should be cut back and away from your roof and gutters. This is a common criticism on home inspections. I have attended over 1400 home inspections (300 in Wood Acres) in my career and I can tell you that tree limbs are considered an enemy to your roof and gutters. Occasionally trim the tree branches up and away from the house. It will improve your sunlight in the home and protect the roof from damage in summer and winter storms. We all love the tall trees and the canopy that makes Wood Acres so unique. Trees need to be nurtured however, especially the grand older specimens in Wood Acres. Feed the trees from time to time and thin them out so that the fierce winds of summer blow through the tree rather than catching the foliage like a sail. You cannot replace a 150 ft. tree. I am a big fan of trimming up the branches to allow sunlight into your home. A skilled arborist can correctly balance sunlight, shade and the health of a tree.

What is the condition of your “hardscape?” This would be your front walk, your driveway, your front steps and front door landing. In general, Wood Acres was not built with concrete driveways like Springfield. Concrete lasts longer and requires less maintenance. Most of the driveways in Wood Acres are asphalt. Asphalt requires a degree of maintenance and the absence of such maintenance results in a lumpy appearance, a breaking apart of the surface and eventual drainage related issues which sometimes result in wet basements. Once compromised, driveway repair and/or replacement is stunningly expensive and when this issue arises as part of a home inspection it can be a daunting issue to overcome.

Is it possible to trip and fall on your front walk? It’s surprising how often a walkway has become uneven, loose, and unstable. This is both unsafe and potentially fraught with liability issues. Last winter, there was a guy going around Bethesda to open houses who purposely tripped and fell coming up the recently snow-cleared front walk and then sent letters stating that he was going to sue unless he was paid \$500 for his trouble. I couldn’t even make this stuff up if I tried! Thus, you need to examine these surfaces. A number of homeowners have made fantastic and significant improvements to their walkways and it electrifies the appearance of the home. Take a walk and check out the simply gorgeous front walkway improvements recently completed by Joanie Hengerer at 5921 Gloster Rd. The materials used are superb, as is the concept of breaking up the traverse to the front door. Many Wood Acres homes sit up a bit on a hill and from time to time I have buyers who complain about having to walk up a lot of steps to the front door. The gentle rise of multiple landings at 5921 Gloster Rd. defeats this objection. The curb appeal of Joanie’s house, enhanced by a great new exterior paint job too, is now exceptional.

Aluminum gutters and downspouts last a long time. Copper gutters and downspouts are rare in Wood Acres; and very expensive. There have been recent incidents of copper gutters and downspouts being stolen off of Chevy Chase houses in broad daylight. Of course, the commodity market has collapsed and with it, some of the profit incentive for stealing stuff off people’s houses. If you have copper, all I can say is “wow!” It’s the best, but probably more commonly seen on a \$3,000,000 house with a great security system! Aluminum should work just fine in Wood Acres.

However, gutters and downspouts don’t work correctly if they are misaligned, rusting through, or not properly connected. Thoroughly examine your gutter and downspout system, it is your best line of defense against a wet basement and the preservation of your exterior paint job. Put on a raincoat

and go outside during a heavy rainstorm and observe how the system functions. Are there areas that are overflowing? Is water leaking through any gutters, are downspouts clogged up? When the water comes out the bottom of the downspout, does it clearly and effectively drain away from the home or is the water just dumped next to the house? Clean your gutters not only in early December but also in May. These are simple, inexpensive aspects that can improve the value of your home and protect you from deteriorating surfaces and problems.

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

Lots of people have ivy growing on their house. Ivy should never come in contact with wood, vinyl, Hardy Plank, or aluminum surfaces, as it can damage your paint job. Ivy will not harm your brick, inspectors say it might take a thousand years to affect the mortar, however, if you have painted brick, the ivy is going to harm the paint job and make it next to impossible to effectively repaint in the future without removing the ivy. An extremely well trained ivy growth, superbly trimmed and maintained, can be very attractive (see Barry and Sandy Harris's left side of the house at 6001 Cobalt), but most owners lose track of it and the speed with which ivy grows can overwhelm a situation quickly. Well trained ivy is a constant commitment.

I'm a huge fan of classy coach lamps, mail slots, door knockers, brass address numbering etc. The front door is the gateway to your home. And a would be buyer will be standing at your front door while I'm fumbling with the key more often than not. They are making judgments and noticing everything. An appealing front door area invites a buyer to love the house. I'm a fan of full view front door storm doors. Some folks don't like a storm door but I think it's great on an open house in early October to have the front door open, letting in all that sunlight, but still have a door to keep out the weather, bugs etc. Some Wood Acres homes do not have a window on the front wall of the living room and with the door closed, the room can be a bit dark. A full view storm door solves this issue. A great example of a terrific front door area can be found by checking out Chris and MaryAnn Lent's front door at 6113 Cromwell Dr. This home actually had a new front portico built not too long ago and it's just gorgeous. Another wonderful front door presentation can be found at the Chalmer's home at 5913 Wiltshire. I also love the front door replacement at the Johnson's residence at 5905 Gloster Rd.

Recently, I have encountered a problem with several outside electrical wires in our community. There are several components to the electrical service in your home. These include the Pepco wires that come high up in the air to your house from the street, the thick wire that comes down the side of your house, the meter itself, another thick wire from the meter through your brick wall to the interior panel, and the electrical panel itself. The two thick wires above and below the meter are often losing the integrity of their covering. Years ago, the material used was an almost cloth-like material. Over time, this material delaminates in sunlight. It starts to separate and tear apart, leaving open the possibility of moisture entering the cable which can wick back down into your electrical panel and cause rusting in the panel. Water and electricity don't mix well and inspectors will often cite the outside wires attached to your home for replacement. Back in the '80's we often persuaded Pepco to pay for this replacement but they stopped providing that service years ago. Thus, you need to go outside and look carefully at your "service entry cables."

If you have an updated electrical panel in the last 15 years or so, your cable will have a smooth plastic type covering. If this is the case, you should be in good shape. However, older electrical systems may have cabling that is separating and starting to come apart. Check not only the long wire from the top of the house but also the short wire from the meter going into your brick. The long wire can cost \$1000-\$1500 to replace, the short wire more like \$750.

You can also end up getting into a philosophical discussion as to whether a new wire will result in a mismatch with your existing electrical panel. We have had circumstances in which the delaminating wire outside has resulted in a Catch-22 in which we had to replace the entire panel as part of a “heavy-up” solution to the problem, at a cost between \$1800-\$2500. This obviously comes as a huge surprise to homeowners who have experienced absolutely no failure in their electrical system and think everything is just fine. If you are having a hard time judging the wire, call me up, I can come look at it. I will often tell homeowners who are selling their house, “these wires could be an issue on home inspection.” This problem is not unique to Wood Acres in any way, exterior entry cables are slowly coming apart everywhere throughout the region.

Chimneys are a constant source of concern on home inspections. None of us climbs a ladder and checks out the condition on the top of the chimney. We don’t get up there and look down the shaft to check that condition either. Many owners never use their chimney. There are all kinds of chimney elements that can cause problems during an inspection. The “crown” on top is made of concrete. When it separates slightly water can penetrate the cracks. In winter, the water freezes and opens the cracks wider. The same process can take place with the brick and mortar at the top of the chimney. When things start to deteriorate up there, the process can accelerate quickly. We often encounter concerns about the flue liners in a chimney, or their absence in some cases. I won’t bore you with the ugly details of “orphaned hot water heaters” and high efficiency furnaces but I can tell you that a surprising number of issues arise related to chimneys, both inside and out. Have your chimney checked out by a professional from time to time. Have them check the integrity of the interior vent ducting from the furnace to the chimney shaft as well, as sometimes these pipes have developed small holes which can emit carbon monoxide. Sometimes, contractors have finished the basement around these ducts and put flammable material too close to the venting. This would be considered a fire hazard.

It can be hard to find a truly honest chimney company. Years ago, my father lived in Westmoreland Hills and had a very well-known company look at his chimney. The technician went out to the truck and used a walkie-talkie to call the office. The tech didn’t know my dad had followed him out to the truck. The tech says into the walkie-talkie “I think the liner is okay, what do you want me to tell him?” Out of the hand-set booms the words, “hit him for a new \$2,000 liner!” Of course, my father heard this, dismissed the company and I have spoken ill of them ever since. I can recount dozens of horror stories related to chimney repair. I believe I have found and use a truly honest company. Call me, I’ll tell you who the good guys are and who the bad guys are too!

Let’s talk about your roof. 21 years ago, I wrote a long piece in a Wood Acres newsletter about Wood Acres roofing. At the time I pointed out that the slate used in Wood Acres was expected to last between 50-60 years. We are way past that point at this stage, with the oldest homes in the neighborhood now approaching 69 years old (hard as that might be to believe!). I think the inspectors are surprised that many original slate roofs are still in pretty good shape. The more whitish rings on the roof, and browning of the slates, the more likely an inspector will tell a prospective buyer to budget for replacement of the slate soon. These Bangor slate roofs are not lifetime slate, like the Vermont or Buckingham slate you might see in Spring Valley. A very few Wood Acres homeowners have Pennsylvania slate, which, while not lifetime, has a significantly longer life than Bangor. Legend has it that the Pennsylvania slate was offered as an upgrade by the builder Albert Walker, but we don’t know for sure. Depending on sun exposure, a Wood Acres

slate roof may be completely worn out or still going strong. It frustrates me when an inspector, mostly to cover his backside, talks about “life expectancy” for slate material and then tells a buyer, “it looks okay now, but probably will need to be replaced in two to five years.” Most buyers don’t know squat about roofs and this potential expense scares them. I could get in the car right now and drive by 20 slate roofs in Wood Acres that were deemed “ready for replacement soon” and that pronouncement was made more than 10 years ago by an inspector. If you have an original slate roof, its care and maintenance is critical. Check for slipped slate, chipped slate, missing slate, clogged copper valleys etc. Be careful who you allow to walk on your roof. Again, honest roofers are hard to come by. I have confidence in a few people, for both repair and replacement, and I can help you.

I drove every street in Wood Acres in late March and literally counted the remaining original slate roofs. The first section of the community was built before World War II on upper Gloster, upper Harwick, Wynnwood, Cobalt, lower Harwick, Welborn Dr. from Gloster to Mass and Mass from Osceola to just past Ramsgate. We could roughly call that about 200 homes, or about half of Wood Acres. There are 66 homes with original slate still on the house. The home I own on Wynnwood Rd. is one of them. Expressed another way, for perspective, about 70% of the original slate roofs have been replaced. Sun exposure, angle to afternoon sun, care and maintenance and general good luck are all factors that have resulted in these roofs making it to the ripe old age of almost 70. And most of them are going strong with life still left in them. I suspect that many, many slate roofs were replaced when they leaked, which again, is not necessarily the event that should dictate replacement.

The other predominant original material used in Wood Acres roofing in the newer section of the community (built after World War II) was cement asbestos shingles. Even the word “asbestos” freaks out a certain segment of the buying public. I owned a house with this kind of roof on Woodacres Dr. for 15 years and the roof is still there and going strong. Stuart & Maury manages that home for rent and the roof continues, at age 57, to perform perfectly. There are ill-informed inspectors out there who will tell the public that this material has a life expectancy of 40 years. This has been definitively proven wrong. Fletcher Roofing told me recently that they think this material may fairly last 70-90 years with routine care and maintenance. I have seen dozens of cement asbestos shingle roofs needlessly replaced over the years in Wood Acres. They weather poorly, don’t always look that great, and are subject to problems if they are walked on by careless service providers like painters, cable guys, chimney people etc. But these roofs are defended by knowledgeable inspectors, who often state that an original cement roof may well outlast the brand new asphalt replacement roof next door!

If you were to price replacement of a cement asbestos shingle roof, the roofer will explain that the existing roof needs to be removed first. Montgomery County does not have any specific disposal rules, which is somewhat surprising. Apparently, our generally less regulated neighbors in Virginia have more stringent removal laws. If you are concerned about proper controls while disposing of the material, there are roofers who will put on the spacesuits and gloves and carefully remove every shingle and then dispose of them in the most environmentally responsible way. This will cost about 20% more than if two guys with a stubby beards chip the shingles off and chuck them in the dumpster in your driveway. I am told by home inspectors that while there might be some immediate health hazard to the workers themselves, the fibers released during this process pose little health hazard outdoors. Still, it might not be the worst idea to send the kids to Chuck E. Cheese during this process.

From a sales standpoint, it is critical that a cement asbestos shingle roof have no

weaknesses. Nothing chipped or slipped or missing. Ridge lines need to be well sealed, as well as all vent stacks. When an inspector is looking at a Wood Acres cement asbestos shingle roof, if its integrity is stellar, the conversation will go much better than if it has deferred maintenance issues. One last thing, if your cement shingle roof leaks it does not necessarily mean you have to replace it. These materials continue to be readily available for repair. If you do choose to replace your cement shingle roof, call me up, I have a local roofer who will come and collect a hundred of your used shingles to use as replacements for others in the neighborhood. Let's call it your civic duty! In my drive around Wood Acres, I was able to determine that there are 27 homes left with the cement asbestos shingle roofing, meaning that about 85% of these roofs have been replaced now.

Asphalt shingle roofing has been the preferred replacement material in Wood Acres for several decades now. It's less expensive than slate or cement and the textured aspects of asphalt shingle roofs can be quite attractive. It is almost always harder for a layman to ascertain the condition of such a roof however. Many homeowners are shocked to discover their roof is 24 years old and deemed "near the end of its useful life" by an inspector. The granules just erode over time. It can be very hard to stand in the front yard and look at your asphalt shingle roof and tell whether such a diagnosis may be directed your way.

However, for what it's worth, a roof "at the end" can still last for many, many years before it actually starts to leak. This is of little comfort to a buyer however. Owners will say, "well, they aren't buying a brand new house." This is true, but few buyers are in a position to judge just how quickly they might get hit with a huge expense (\$4500-\$6500) for a new roof. This expense, or "potential" expense can come as a surprise at home inspection. It's worth having a professional examine your asphalt shingle roof from time to time for integrity and proper performance. "An ounce of prevention..." An inspection will also help your perspective on the advancing age of this roof material. Always, always, always, get a few estimates if you are considering replacement.

Let's have a discussion about windows. 400 homes were built by Walker from 1940-1958. From my careful count, 25 of them had metal casement windows. I drove the neighborhood the other day and counted, all but five of these homes have replaced their windows. Issues of energy efficiency and operation are a common issue when these homes are sold, but I have often pointed out to buyers that these homes have been in use for *decades* and lots of people have comfortably lived in these homes with these kinds of windows. However, with energy costs soaring, efficiency is a legitimate issue these days and metal casement windows can negatively influence the sales process.

The standard wood double hung windows found in the rest of Wood Acres have stood the test of time gracefully. Coupled with storm windows on the outside, I believe that these windows are not only attractive but also functional and worth retaining. The cost of replacing all the windows in a Wood Acres homes can run between as low as \$400 to as high as \$1,000 a window. This total cost can exceed, in some cases, \$18,000. Many Wood Acres owners have opted to replace their windows and love the results. Again, I drove the neighborhood. 73 of 375 homes have replaced their original wood windows. This is about 20% of the community. Many of these replacements were done as part of a full-scale home renovation. New windows are easier to clean, go up and down consistently and hold their position, are more energy efficient and require less exterior painting and maintenance. These are all pluses. I have sold many of these homes and buyers are pleased to have newer windows, although sometimes the windows don't entirely match the classic, timeless architecture of the 40's and 50's. However, I have a hard time justifying the cost related to benefit of a brand new window installation.

There are very few examples of a dollar for dollar return on the investment when the home is eventually sold. In the future, this may become more of an issue as the original windows get older and older and energy costs continue to soar. Certainly, if you retain the older windows, having storm windows to improve energy efficiency, both for warmth and costs, is a good idea. I just think it would be hard to save enough in heating/cooling costs to make up \$10,000-\$18,000. There is definitely some resale bang for the buck, but probably not dollar for dollar. Not everything is about money and resale however. If new windows provide comfort and convenience to an owner, the expense can be tolerated, and the selection of the new windows is harmonious to the original architecture, then go for it. I love the quality and appearance of the newer windows at the Murphy's home at 6101 Cromwell Dr., the Bartolemei's windows at 5706 Upper Harwick, and the newer windows at the Godschalk's home at 6002 Woodacres Dr.

You might find it interesting that up until last year, agents were able to call the utility companies to get the average utility bills for a piece of property so that potential buyers could accurately assess the cost of living in a home. Pepco and Washington Gas won't release that information to agents anymore, only directly to the homeowner. It's a valuable piece of information to pass on when you go to sell your home, so keep good records. Additionally, there is now a brand new law which requires the seller of a property to provide such information as part of the sales process. Be advised.

This is a fairly exhaustive discussion of exterior issues related to home care. In the next newsletter, we will move inside and discuss ways to enhance value and protect your investment. As a final word, I offer the following. During the course of a 29 year real estate career, I have observed the work of many contractors and home inspectors. While no one is perfect, one of the more skilled, knowledgeable, communicative, and smart guys I have ever met is George Pettie of HomeChek. George has performed over 25,000 home inspections. He is uniquely able to diagnose a condition and offer a sensible repair course. If you have a specific issue, for \$200.00 you can obtain a completely independent opinion AND a written plan of action from George. This is called a "partial inspection." If you are told you need a new roof, new gutters, a chimney liner, a new furnace, foundation related problems, grading, wet basement problems etc., the best \$200.00 you will ever spend will be with George Pettie. His number is 703-534-2200. He will look at a couple of issues for you for this cost, but not do a full home inspection, which would normally cost about \$700.00. George doesn't need to work every day anymore and can be sometimes difficult to book, but it's worth it. Tell Henry, his secretary, that I told you to call and feel free to call me to discuss any major expense you might encounter.

Finally, I have a great four bedroom (upstairs) listing coming on the market any day now in Wood Acres. If you have friends or family members thinking about a move to our great community, give me a call. I have all kinds of ideas beyond what is for sale on the market too!

Sincerely,



Matthew Maury
301-928-8686 Cell
301-654-3200 Office
Stuart & Maury, Inc. Realtors

The #1 real estate agent in the 20816 zip code, 25 years in a row.