

Web Posted: 11/24/2008 7:57 CST

## S.A. called one of top housing markets

By Aïssatou Sidimé - Express-News The Mortgage Bankers Association proclaimed San Antonio one of the top markets in the U.S. for home buyers, citing its high employment rate, population growth and better-than-average price appreciation as key factors.

San Antonio's median home prices continued to perform better than all U.S. regions, dipping 1 percent in October from October last year, versus an 11.3 percent drop nationwide, according to data released Monday by the National Association of Realtors.

San Antonio is in the Southern region, which showed a 5.8 percent decline in median prices during the same period — the best regional performance in the nation.

“With 95 percent employment and people moving in, your glass is more than half full,” said David Kittle, chairman of the Mortgage Bankers Association, which tracks mortgages made by nonbank lenders. “You are the benchmark for the rest of the country in lending and building.”

Kittle also praised Bexar County's low tax rate, saying it continues to attract businesses that hire new employees who are looking for homes.

Population growth in Texas is expected to remain above 2 percent next year compared with a negative projected growth rate for the United States.

A large chunk of the projected Texas population growth will be in the Denton-San Antonio-Houston triangle, according to Texas A&M University's Real Estate Center.

The San Antonio housing market also has benefited from historically stable growth that avoided the large run-up in prices in 2005 and 2006, and the subsequent steep price declines some areas in the U.S. are experiencing now.

As a result, increases in Bexar County foreclosure listings are substantially lower than the growth in foreclosures nationwide. Foreclosure auction postings in the county are up 22.7 percent for the year, according to data provided by RexReport.com, which tracks foreclosure postings.

Nationwide, foreclosure activity is up 45 percent, according to RealtyTrac, which tracks foreclosure filings, sales and home repossessions.

“Our foreclosures are up slightly this year but not enough to worry like the rest of the U.S.,” said Michael Moore, outgoing president of the Greater San Antonio Builders Association.

While lenders nationwide are reporting a tightening of credit, San Antonio lender Van Stewart reported widespread availability for borrowers with credit scores at least 580 and a history of paying debts.

“We're busy in our office,” said Stewart, chief operating officer at SWBC Mortgage in San Antonio.

Some lenders have fallen by the wayside, but, Stewart said, he's been able to fill the void by placing more borrowers into mortgages insured by the Federal Housing Administration. About 35 percent of his new loans are FHA-insured so far this year versus 3 percent in 2007.

“The thing that has changed about underwriting is that we have gone back to underwriting that is not just about getting people into homes but about keeping them in houses for 10, 15 years,” he said.

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