



America's Newspapers

Rooted in real estate

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, September 21, 2006

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SUMMARY: Like few other immigrants, Russian-speaking families are snapping up homes across the metro area and spawning industry professionals

On a quiet afternoon, Mariya Paskalov watches a school bus pull up to the front of her new house in Riverwood Estates, an elegant subdivision that's still under construction.

Soon, her three children rush into the house, tear off their shoes and greet Mariya and her husband Leonid in a mix of Russian and English.

Russian-speaking families from the former Soviet Union occupy most of the subdivision of 87 homes in the east Multnomah County town of Wood Village, according to real estate agents who sold the homes. Houses range from \$220,000 to \$315,000.

Traditionally, Russian-speaking immigrants congregated in Southeast Portland, but that is changing, real estate agents say. Many families, such as the Paskalovs, are moving to suburbs such as Wood Village, Beaverton or Clackamas, buying more expensive homes and riding the real estate boom like few other immigrant groups.

Their fixation with home ownership, spawned in a homeland that once eschewed private ownership, has made these immigrants a strong, if small, consumer niche in the Portland-area residential real estate market --and, in turn, has bred a notable presence of Russian-speaking immigrants in the local real estate and construction industries.

A decade ago, the Paskalovs arrived in Portland from an industrial town in Ukraine carrying three suitcases, \$600 in cash and a baby. Like many religious refugees from the former Soviet Union, they were sponsored by a church and later had to repay their airfares. For about a year, Lutheran Family Services helped the couple pay for an apartment.

Yet, they managed to buy a home in Southeast Portland a year after arriving the United States.

The Wood Village house is the family's second home. The Paskalovs moved to Riverwood Estates over the summer, as construction workers paved roads and erected homes. With four bedrooms, 2 1/2 bathrooms and a spacious back porch, their home is more than twice as big as their Southeast Portland home.

The Paskalovs could buy each home because Mariya's parents lived with the couple and supplemented Leonid's income as a custom cabinetmaker and Mariya's pay as a self-employed house cleaner.

As their children played on the porch earlier this month, Mariya, 39, reflected on why buying a house was important to her.

"I want to have a place of my own, for all the memories where my kids are growing up," she said. "And here, it's a good investment, too, when you buy a house. Maybe we don't understand it the first time we buy a house. But when we sell it, we understand."

Home-oriented group

For some immigrants, it's extremely difficult to buy a home. Many wait years, even a generation or two, before buying.

Area real estate agents point out that several characteristics of the Russian-speaking community make its members particularly eager for quick home ownership.

Russian-speakers are extraordinarily home-oriented, real estate experts said. They prefer to own a home and don't like to rent. In the Soviet Union, many could not own property because the state owned almost everything.

Because Russian-speakers tend to have large families --an average of at least five children, community activists say --they prefer sizeable homes with yards.

They can afford the homes, despite being new immigrants, because all working-age family members help make mortgage payments. Children often don't leave the households until they marry and, in the meantime, contribute to the family coffers.

"They stick together," said Kira Govshtein, a Russian-speaking real estate agent. "Brother helps another brother; children help parents and the other way. Russian families are much closer than the average American families."

Some Russian-speaking immigrants tend to buy homes a few months after arriving in the United States, said Vladimir Zaharchook, a Russian-speaking broker who sold the Paskalovs their home. Many families, predominantly conservative Christian refugees who escaped from persecution in the former Soviet Union a decade ago, are now buying second or third homes, he said.

"The main goal of every Russian-speaking family is to buy a house, as soon as they get here," said Zaharchook, principal broker for Prudential Northwest Properties, who leads a team of mostly Russian-speaking agents. "And many people in our community can now afford good-sized houses. The community is older and coming into its own, money-wise."

More in the industry

The thirst for homeownership among immigrants from the former Soviet Union has led to a multiplication of Russian-speaking real estate agents, Govshtein said.

Govshtein owns the Metropolitan Realty agency in Southwest Portland and leads a team of 10 mostly Slavic agents. Her firm, she says, sells several homes a week to Russian-speaking families.

Govshtein came to Portland 17 years ago from Latvia. She became a real estate agent in 2001, when she noted an impending boom of potential buyers.

"During the last two years, a lot of new Russian agents started out," she said. "Almost every other family has an agent!"

These agents often share a common language and an empathy for the home-ownership drive, she said.

"Immigrants are more vulnerable home buyers than the Americans because of the language barrier," Govshtein said. "As a Russian-speaking agent, you feel obligated to help them because these are your own people."

Zaharchook is one of the best-known Russian-speaking brokers.

In Russian real estate circles, he is called "the agent." A tall Russian who came to Portland from St. Petersburg 13 years ago, he exudes confidence. Last year, Zaharchook was the number one Prudential Northwest Properties broker in residential units sold in the area including Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties, where Prudential has 11 branches.

On average, he sold a house every other day --that's 161 homes, most sold to Russian-speaking clients --spanning all price ranges.

Zaharchook also was one of the top 100 brokers for the nationwide Prudential network in 2005. So far this year, he has sold more than 120 homes.

Many Russian-speakers in the Portland area are employed in the construction or building business in skilled jobs that allow them to pave their way to buying larger, more expensive homes. New immigrants snap up starter homes, upgrade them, sell them for higher prices, then buy better homes.

Many Russians who are in the building industry also are stepping up their offerings to include high-end quality homes, some with high price tags.

It's telling that two of the six builders who exhibited homes as part of the 2006 Street of Dreams were from the former Soviet Union. One, 27-years-old Vitaly Martinov of Portland-based Stoneridge Custom Homes, garnered the event's top honors, picking up several Best in Show awards. The cost of his Street of Dream home: \$3.5 million.

"A few years ago, Russians were buying the cheapest homes in the most rundown neighborhoods," Govshtein said. "But they helped make Southeast Portland prosperous, and now they are buying second homes, becoming investors or reselling them again."

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Graphic - Chart Growing community

Edition: Sunrise

Section: Business

Page: B01

Record Number: MERLIN_8618684

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