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Area home sales soar

June sales rose 66% from a year ago; rising interest rates are driving buyers.

By [Rich Shopes](#) and [Stephen Frater](#) STAFF WRITERS

June was another hot month for Southwest Florida real estate agents who set a torrid pace with 1,604 home sales -- 66 percent more than the same month a year ago.

That was the Sunshine State's highest percentage increase and it came as sales of existing homes nationwide hit an all-time high.

Rising mortgage rates triggered a rush by fence-sitters to close deals before rates went higher.

Prices took a big jump, too, with the median price for houses in Sarasota-Bradenton climbing 30 percent to \$242,900, the Florida Association of Realtors reported.

Statewide, real estate agents were less busy, but only slightly. They recorded 31 percent more sales and median prices that climbed by 19 percent.

In the Charlotte County-North Port market, the median sales price in June rose 35 percent over a year ago, to \$187,400, the highest percentage increase in the state behind the Naples market's 42 percent hike.

"Interest rates were just raised by the Fed so I think a lot of people are thinking that they better make a decision now," FAR spokeswoman Marla Martin said.

Mortgage rates for June were higher than in previous months but they still stayed near the historic lows set last year.

According to mortgage giant Fannie Mae, the average rate for a 30-year mortgage was 6.29 percent for June; it was 5.23 percent in June 2003.

"That being said, our members are telling me that the supply is low, too, so when people are finding something, they're making a decision right away," Martin added.

Low inventory and rising interest are creating two-prong incentive to nudge buyers off the fence, said Lynn Parker, vice president and general manager of Manatee County-based Wagner Realty.

"If you look at our inventory in Manatee from 2003 to 2004 for the month of June it's down from last year, so it does make it critical for buyers to make a decision," Parker said.

Also contributing are the number of families who waited for their children to finish school before closing their home sales and moving.

"That always happens when school gets out," Martin said.

Real estate agents in the Charlotte County-North Port market kept busy too. The number of sales increased 12 percent. The 35 percent increase in median sales price was from \$139,300 to \$187,400. Only Naples' 42 percent increase to \$430,700 was higher, and some Charlotte agents see a possible link.

"For two years now, we've been selling to Naples buyers. They're coming here after seeing our prices and our waterfront," said Al Rogers, of Punta Gorda's Re/Max Harbor Realty. "Naples prices make us seem like a deal and we've been so inexpensive for so long, we're playing catch-up now."

Rosemary Mahoney, one of four governors of the Women's Council of Realtors and an agent with Port Charlotte's Professional Realty, said she's not surprised at the increases.

Charlotte County is the "last and best-kept" real estate secret in the state, she said.

"The secret's out now," she said. "People who look at buying Charlotte real estate and say they're going to think about it for a couple months, come back and find prices have moved up in the tens of thousands of dollars."

That's the same theme playing across Florida.

Agents say buyers are worried that if they don't act now, they could be priced out of the market, or be forced to consider smaller houses.

Among Florida's larger markets, the Orlando area reported the highest percentage increase -- 47 percent -- in resales last month, with a total of 4,132 homes changing hands compared with 2,807 homes sold a year ago. The area's median sales price rose 13 percent to \$167,600; a year ago, it was \$148,600.

In smaller markets, Fort Walton Beach was the sales leader with 583 sales for a 50 percent gain. Median prices there jumped 26 percent to \$194,700.
