

REAL ESTATE

Buying a Single-Family Home in Arlington, Va., Is a Study in Patience

With persistence and perseverance, these families were able to buy a house in their favorite Washington, D.C., suburb

By *Cecilie Rohwedder* [Follow](#) / *Photographs by Olivia Alonso Gough for The Wall Street Journal*

Aug. 18, 2022 3:25 pm ET

Elena and Matthew Fierro looked at 30 houses in Arlington, Va., before finding what has become a veritable golden ticket in the Washington, D.C., suburb: a single-family home.

After months of combing through slim pickings, the Fierros succeeded in buying a classic, red brick colonial house, with blue shutters and a flag out front, for \$735,000 in early December 2021. Properties like their new three-bedroom, 1,900-square-foot house are rare finds for young families stretching to buy starter homes in Arlington.

“We didn’t think we’d be able to find a single-family home within our budget,” said Mr. Fierro, an infrastructure engineer at the Pentagon. “At any given time, there were no more than maybe three single-family houses under \$750,000 on the market.”



Across the Potomac River from Washington, Arlington was long considered an affordable alternative to the costly capital, said Carol Temple, a real-estate agent with Coldwell Banker in Arlington. With the average single-family home now worth \$1.4 million, according to Bright MLS, a Rockville, Md.-based multiple listing service, that has changed. Even before Amazon.com Inc. selected Arlington for its second headquarters in 2018, the area was popular with Washington lawyers and lobbyists, military families and young professionals in northern Virginia's booming technology sector, said Ms. Temple. Then came the Amazon announcement, and developers built high-rise buildings along subway and light rail lines, anticipating an influx of tech-minded millennials, she said.



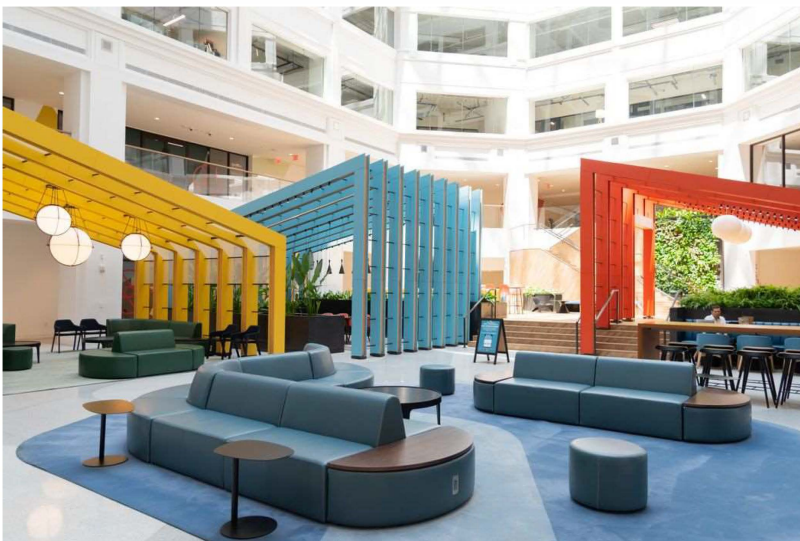
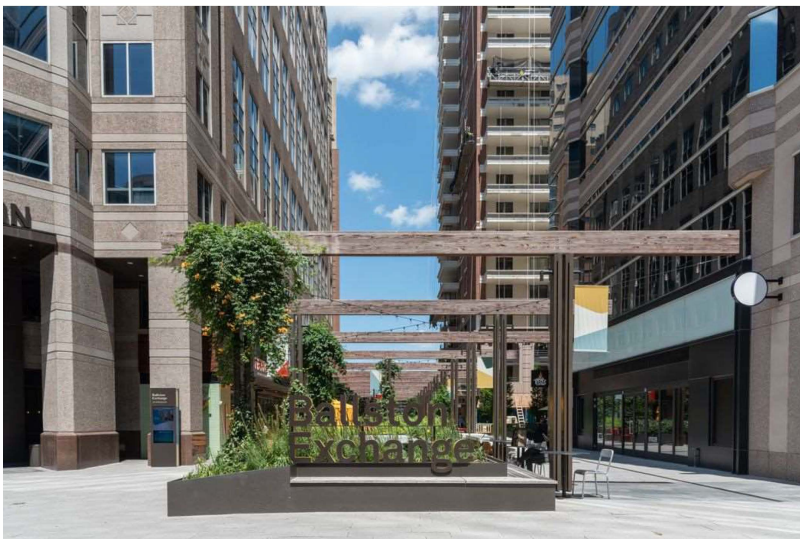
But many of those millennials are well paid and want larger homes than they would get in those high-rises, said David Howell, executive vice president and Chief Information Officer with McEneaney Associates in Washington. Others are starting families or moving to Arlington for its good schools, said Mr. Howell, or for new jobs with federal agencies and Arlington-based companies such as Boeing Co. or Nestle SA's U.S. headquarters. There is little land for building new single-family housing, he noted. The pandemic worsened the shortage, according to Ryan McLaughlin, chief executive officer of the Northern Virginia Association of Realtors. Older homeowners didn't downsize, he said, and others renovated houses they now hesitate to leave. Now, he added, owners also balk at trading low mortgage rates for new, higher ones.



“Single-family homes are the hottest ticket in town, for sure,” said Mr. McLaughlin. “The extraordinary price growth has left many homeowners with very expensive homes while leaving first-time home buyers wondering how they will afford to buy one.”

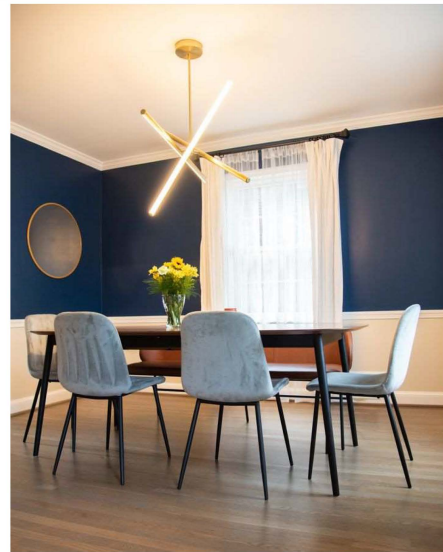
Despite the slowdown in the overall market, the median price for a single-family detached home in Arlington County rose by 16.5% between July 2021 and July 2022, according to Bright MLS. The average number of days homes stay on the market rose from last July, but only by two days to 18 days, the service reported. At the end of July, there were 147 detached homes on the market in Arlington, 21 more than in July 2021, according to Bright MLS.

“The market is slightly softer but there are still few options for potential buyers,” said Terry Clower, a professor of public policy at George Mason University and director of the university’s Center for Regional Analysis. “At best, maybe things are a little bit less crazy than they were a few months ago.”



Hopeful home buyers pound the pavement looking for sales signs, ready to pounce when opportunities arise, said Betsy Twigg, an agent with McEneaney Associates in Arlington. Others enter bidding wars for fixer-uppers or stretch to buy pricier new houses that enterprising home builders squeeze onto historic lots, said Ryan Mills, an agent with Redfin in Falls Church, Va. Young buyers are also scrambling for cash to afford the higher down payments that come with rising house prices, according to Reggie Copeland, an agent with C.R. Copeland Real Estate in Fairfax, Va.

“What I tell my buyers is two Ps—patience and persistence,” said Michelle Doherty, a real-estate agent with RLAH Real Estate in Arlington who helped the Fierros find their house.



The Fierro family at the classic, colonial-style home they bought in December 2021.

Ms. Doherty and the Fierros looked in different parts of Arlington and at houses in dire disrepair, Ms. Fierro said. In early November, three houses under \$750,000 hit the market. One immediately went under contract, but the Fierros looked at two and made an offer for one, listed at \$715,000, the same night. They offered \$725,000, but the seller asked for \$735,000. With an open house coming up, Ms. Fierro said they knew they risked losing their chance if they didn't pay up. After months of living with Ms. Fierro's parents, they agreed. With son Leo, 3, the Fierros, both 36, now enjoy a spacious ground floor, with dining room walls freshly painted blue and taupe, and a living area overlooking the backyard, where they have spotted a red fox. They were happy they didn't give up on Arlington to move further out. Ms. Fierro's family has lived in Arlington for 30 years, and her job as a technical program manager with Amazon might soon require a return to the office.

“We didn’t know if remote work is going to be forever,” she said, playing blocks on the floor with Leo.

New arrivals Kate and Robert Baldwin took a leap of faith to find their new home: in December, they bought a fixer-upper in a whirlwind process while at an out-of-town wedding, waiving the inspection. When the sellers accepted their \$1.3 million bid for the four-bedroom, 2,600-square-foot house, they didn’t celebrate to avoid detracting from the bride and groom.



Newly married themselves and looking to trade their D.C. apartment for a single-family house with space for future children, Mr. Baldwin said they had begun to feel pessimistic about their chances when their real-estate agent, Sheri Grant with TTR Sotheby’s International Realty in Arlington, called to suggest they look at a white clapboard house with a wraparound porch coming on the market on a quiet corner near the Key Bridge to D.C.

The Baldwins, both 29, visited twice before an open house planned for the coming weekend and asked if they could make an offer, Mr. Baldwin recalled. Told no offers would be considered until the following week, the Baldwins left for the Florida wedding. When the deadline was moved up, Mr. Baldwin said they raced to complete a bid, just before turning off their phones for the ceremony. The house, built in 1929 and not updated since the 1980s, was theirs.

“They were willing to buy a house that needed a lot of work but was in a desirable neighborhood,” said Sotheby’s Ms. Grant.

That work didn’t scare Mr. Baldwin, head of policy at a trade association in Washington. With a father in the building business, he said he has a trained eye and could gauge the home’s potential and extent of required renovations. He and Ms. Baldwin, program manager at a D.C.-based venture-capital firm, managed the project themselves, shopping on Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace, spending Saturdays at Home Depot and paying for only materials and labor—roughly \$60,000. Now the house has freshly painted kitchen cabinets and hardwood floors, new bathroom tiles with modern wallpaper and new light fixtures throughout. When spring came, Ms. Baldwin said their new home surprised them with a sea of hydrangeas outside.

Mitch and Caroline Waldner bought a newly built, six-bedroom, 5,200-square-foot house for \$2.15 million in April of this year. With four children, Mr. Waldner said their previous 1,700-square-foot house was bursting at the seams, but the Waldners hoped to stay in the same school district. This is a challenge in a market with hardly any inventory, said their real-estate agent, Allison Goodhart DuShuttle with the Goodhart Group in Alexandria, Va. Ms. Waldner, a 37-year-old lawyer, said she was out walking one evening when she saw a new construction site with a For Sale sign. That house, she learned, was under contract but the builder had two projects near completion on a double lot nearby. To create it, an existing lot was split, allowing for two detached houses where there used to be one. On their first visit in February, Mr. Waldner said they felt the remaining yard was too small but after a second look in March, they put in an offer, locking in a favorable mortgage rate just before a rate increase.

“What you gain in the house, you lose in the yard,” said Mr. Waldner, 38, an actuary with the federal government. “But there is a little bit of space back there,” he said, pointing to a paved patio area with an outdoor dining table and a strip of grass with a colorful play roller coaster.



Now the Waldners, who said they started dating as high-schoolers in Kentucky, have a big playroom for daughter Lucy, 7, and sons Bruce, 5, Woody, 2, and Cal, 1. The house comes with large closets, an upstairs laundry room and a stand-alone tub in the primary bathroom. The children play with young neighbors in the street, barely recognizable as an old Arlington neighborhood because there are so many new houses.

Arlington County is addressing the cost and lack of family housing. An initiative called “Missing Middle Housing Study” is exploring whether the zoning code should be changed to allow for townhomes, duplexes, triplexes and buildings with up to eight units in neighborhoods that currently allow for only single-family homes. Erika Moore, communications and engagement manager with the county, said one goal was to give residents more housing options. The County Board is planning to decide by December.

“We need to find a way for teachers and others vital to our community to be able to live in Arlington,” said Shakti Shukla, a digital marketing and communications consultant and Arlington native. “I don’t know if letting developers build triplexes is the way to solve the housing shortage.”

Ms. Shukla said she and her husband, Norm Gorcys, a senior product management director with CoStar Group, a commercial real-estate firm, signed the contract on their own new home within four days of spotting a For Sale sign that Ms. Twigg, the agent with McEneaney Associates, had planted outside a new construction down the street. Set on staying in the neighborhood where Ms. Shukla grew up and where her parents still live, the couple, both 49, closed on the six-bedroom, 4,600-square-foot home in April of this year. They paid \$2.1 million for the white, three-story house with a backyard that fits a large

trampoline for twins, Reva and Lila, 10, and son, Devesh, 7. Ms. Shukla laments some of the changes in Arlington's neighborhoods but she is determined to stay.

"We are Arlingtonians," she said.

