THE TOPAZ GROUP

Homebuyer's Guide

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS,
IN THE ORDER IT HAPPENS

John Pham

NORTHERN VIRGINIA · WASHINGTON DC · MARYLAND

TG

Contents

FOUNDER, THE TOPAZ GROUP

John Pham

My parents came from Vietnam as refugees. I'm first generation, and we didn't have much growing up. That's most of why I work with first-time buyers now. I know what it is to sit across from something expensive and not want to look like you don't understand it.

I didn't start in real estate. My first career was in IT, four years as a systems engineer on projects for Fortune 500 companies and Amazon. Stable, paid well, and I was quietly miserable. A mentor got me into my first few transactions and it clicked. Handing keys to a first-time buyer was something I was never going to get from behind a screen.

What carried over from that career is unglamorous and useful. I'm organized about deadlines and I read the contract properly. A purchase is about thirty days of moving parts, and most of what goes wrong is somebody not tracking one of them.

My business is entirely referral-based. I don't buy leads. The only way I grow is by doing work good enough that people hand me the names of the people they care about, which is a reasonable thing for you to hold me to.

> *Every client should feel like the only one I'm working with.*
>
> *FEATURED IN NOVA REAL PRODUCERS · RISING STAR, APRIL 2025*

$10.7M
CLOSED IN 2025

$10.6M
CLOSED IN 2024

RENE
CERTIFIED NEGOTIATION EXPERT

Who else you'll be dealing with

You'll mostly be talking to me. But a purchase involves several people, and it's worth knowing who they are before they start showing up in your inbox.

John Pham

FOUNDER · LICENSED IN VA, DC AND MD

Your point of contact start to finish. I answer my own phone. If you get a text at nine at night about a house you're worried about, that's me answering it, not an assistant.

Alison Pierre

TRANSACTION COORDINATOR

Once you're under contract, Alison tracks every deadline and document so nothing slips. She's the reason the thirty days between offer and keys stay boring, which is exactly what you want them to be.

YOU'LL ALSO WORK WITH

A lender
Handles your pre-approval and your loan. I'll introduce you to a few and you pick. You are never required to use anyone I suggest.

A home inspector
Independent, hired by you, works for you. Their job is to find problems, and a good one will find some in every house.

A title company
Runs the title search, issues insurance, and handles settlement. Again, your choice entirely.

Four things I'll commit to

Most of what agents promise is impossible to check. These four are specific enough that you'll know within a few weeks whether I meant them.

01 I'll tell you what's wrong with a house

Not just the light in the kitchen. The grading that sends water toward the foundation, the HVAC that's fifteen years old, the addition that doesn't look permitted. I'd rather lose a sale than have you find it in year two.

02 I'll tell you when the timing is wrong

Sometimes the honest answer is that you should wait six months, pay down a card, or keep renting while you save. Everything I have comes from what people say about me afterward, so I'd rather be the person you recommend in three years than the one who rushed you this spring.

03 If something isn't clear, that's on me

This industry runs on jargon and most of it is unnecessary. If I explain something and it doesn't land, that's my failure, not yours. Ask me again. Ask me four times.

04 You get me, not a handoff

Some agents win your business and then pass you to a junior member. You'll have my number and I'm the one who picks up. That's a limit on how many clients I take, which is the point.

Before you start looking at houses

A strong purchase is mostly decided before the first showing. Get these four right and the rest of it gets a lot easier.

01

Know your real numbers

Income, savings, monthly obligations, credit. Not the number you wish were true, the one that is. Everything downstream depends on this being honest.

02

Get pre-approved

A pre-approval tells you your ceiling and your monthly payment. Without one, sellers won't take your offer seriously, and you'll waste weekends on houses you can't buy.

03

Narrow the map

Fairfax is big and school pyramids don't follow town lines. We work out which areas fit your number and your commute before we start spending Saturdays.

04

Decide what you won't bend on

Two or three real dealbreakers, agreed in advance. It's much harder to think clearly about this standing in a house you already like.

> *Most first-time buyers I meet are quietly worried about looking uninformed. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Nobody is born knowing this.*

The buying process

Nine stages from first conversation to keys. Most purchases run thirty to sixty days from accepted offer to settlement.

You won't have to remember any of this. It's here so nothing surprises you.

01 Pre-approval

You talk to a lender, they review your finances, and you learn what you can actually borrow.

02 Strategy call

Goals, timeline, dealbreakers, areas. We build the search around what you actually want.

03 The search

I set up real MLS alerts and we go see houses. Early on the job is elimination, not falling in love.

04 The offer

We look at comparable sales and the competition, then structure terms designed to win without overpaying.

05 Under contract

Accepted. Now the clock starts on a series of deadlines, and Alison starts tracking every one.

06 Inspection

An inspector goes through the house. We review what they find and decide what to ask for.

07 Appraisal and loan

Your lender orders an appraisal and works toward final approval. I stay on top of both.

08 Final walkthrough

Usually the day before settlement. We confirm the house is in the condition you agreed to.

09 Settlement

You sign, funds transfer, ownership records. You get the keys.

What it costs, and when

The purchase price is not the whole number. Here's what you'll actually pay and roughly when each piece is due.

BEFORE SETTLEMENT

01 Earnest money deposit
A good-faith deposit with your offer, usually one to two percent. Held in escrow and applied to your costs at closing, not an extra expense.

02 Home inspection
Typically $400 to $700 depending on size and add-ons like radon or sewer scope. Paid out of pocket at the time.

03 Appraisal
Often $500 to $800, usually collected by your lender early in the process.

AT SETTLEMENT

01 Down payment
Anywhere from three percent to twenty depending on the loan. Less down means a higher payment and usually mortgage insurance.

02 Closing costs
Lender fees, title services, settlement coordination. Budget two to five percent of the price. Sometimes negotiable with the seller.

03 Title work and insurance
Title search plus an owner's policy protecting your ownership against defects nobody caught.

04 Prepaids and escrow
Prorated property taxes, homeowners insurance, and a few months of escrow set up in advance.

> *I'll give you a written estimate early, before you're emotionally committed to a house. Surprises at settlement are a failure of planning, not a fact of life.*

An offer is more than a price

Price is one of about six things a seller weighs. In a competitive situation the other five are often what decides it, and they cost you less than money does.

01

Price

What you offer, informed by recent comparable sales and what else is on the market right now. High enough to be taken seriously, not higher than the house is worth.

02

Earnest money

A larger deposit signals seriousness at no real cost to you, since it's applied at closing. One of the cheapest ways to strengthen an offer.

03

Contingencies

Inspection, financing and appraisal protections. Fewer contingencies makes an offer stronger and riskier. We decide together which risks are worth taking.

04

Settlement date

Sellers often care about timing more than a few thousand dollars. Matching their preferred date can win a house outright.

05

Escalation clause

Automatically raises your offer above competing bids up to a ceiling you set. Useful in a multiple-offer situation and dangerous if you set the ceiling carelessly.

06

Seller credits

Asking the seller to cover part of your closing costs. It effectively lowers your cash to close, though it may mean a slightly higher price.

The appraisal

An independent licensed appraiser gives an opinion of what the house is worth. Your lender orders it, because they won't lend more than the property supports.

It usually happens quietly in the background and you never think about it again. Occasionally it comes in low, and then it matters a great deal.

> *A low appraisal doesn't automatically mean a bad purchase. It means we have a decision to make.*

THREE OUTCOMES

01 At or above value

Nothing changes. The transaction proceeds as agreed, and if it came in above, you have instant equity.

02 Below value, with a contingency

If you kept the appraisal contingency, you have options: renegotiate the price, bring extra cash to cover the gap, or walk away with your deposit.

03 Below value, without one

If you waived it to win the house, you're generally obligated to cover the difference in cash. This is why waiving is a decision, not a formality.

Low appraisals are more common in fast-moving markets and on unusual properties with few genuine comparables. We'll talk about the risk before you waive anything.

The home inspection

An inspector spends two to three hours going through the house so you find out what you're buying before it's yours. Come along if you can. It's the best education you'll get.

01 **What gets looked at**

Roof, structure, foundation, electrical, plumbing, HVAC, insulation, drainage, appliances. Add-ons worth considering: radon, sewer scope on older homes, chimney if there's a fireplace.

02 **Every house has a list**

A clean report doesn't exist. The question is never whether there are findings, it's which ones are expensive, which are safety issues, and which are just a house being a house.

03 **What you can ask for**

Repairs before settlement, a credit at closing, or a price reduction. A credit is often cleaner than repairs, because you control who does the work and how well.

04 **Your option to void**

If the inspection turns up something you're not willing to take on, the contingency generally lets you walk within the inspection period and recover your deposit.

05 **Waiving the inspection**

In competitive markets some buyers waive to strengthen an offer. Occasionally that's a reasonable calculated risk. Often it isn't. A middle path is an information-only inspection: you look, you learn, but you don't ask for anything.

Contingencies

A contingency is a condition that has to be met or you can exit the contract and keep your deposit. They're the protections built into the agreement.

Every contingency you keep makes your offer safer for you and slightly weaker to a seller. Every one you waive does the reverse. That trade is the whole game in a competitive market.

> *Waiving a contingency isn't a formality. It's you accepting a specific risk, in exchange for a better chance at the house.*

01 Financing contingency

Protects you if your loan falls through for reasons outside your control. Waiving it means you're on the hook whether or not the money arrives.

02 Appraisal contingency

Protects you if the house appraises below the contract price. Waiving means covering any gap in cash.

03 Inspection contingency

Gives you a window to inspect and to negotiate, repair or walk. Can be kept, narrowed to major items only, or waived.

04 HOA document review

In Virginia, a statutory period to review association documents after receiving them, with the right to cancel. Do not treat this as paperwork.

05 Sale of your current home

If you need to sell before you buy. It's the weakest position in a competitive market, so we plan around it early.

The documents nobody reads

This is the least exciting part of a purchase and the part that most often causes regret. Read these. I'll go through them with you.

01 HOA and condo documents

Rules, budgets, reserve studies, meeting minutes, pending assessments. Buried in here is whether the association is solvent and whether a special assessment is coming. A thin reserve fund is a future bill with your name on it.

02 Property survey

Shows boundaries, easements and encroachments. This is how you find out the fence is three feet onto the neighbor's lot, or that a utility easement runs where you wanted the addition.

03 Title insurance

Protects your ownership against defects the search missed: recording errors, undisclosed liens, an heir nobody knew about. A one-time premium at settlement.

04 How you take title

Sole ownership is one person. **Joint tenants with right of survivorship** passes automatically to the survivor. **Tenants in common** allows unequal shares. **Tenants by the entirety** is available to married couples in Virginia and adds creditor protection. Worth a conversation with an attorney if anything is complicated.

> *The most valuable protections in a transaction are usually in the documents you never expected to need.*

The last two weeks

By this point the hard decisions are behind you. What's left is execution, and the main risk is somebody missing a date.

One practical thing: don't open new credit, change jobs, or make a large purchase between contract and closing. Lenders re-verify at the end, and buyers lose loans this way every year.

> *The thirty days between offer and keys should be boring. Boring is the product.*

01 Final walkthrough

Usually the day before or morning of settlement. We confirm agreed repairs were done, the house is empty, and everything still works.

02 Closing disclosure

Arrives at least three business days before settlement with your final numbers. Compare it to your estimate and ask about anything that moved.

03 Settlement

You sign, funds transfer, the deed records. Usually about an hour. Bring ID and whatever the title company asked for.

04 Keys

Generally at the table once recording confirms. Change the locks in the first week, whatever anyone tells you about how many copies exist.

05 After

I'm still around. Contractor recommendations, tax assessment questions, what your place is worth in four years. That part doesn't end at settlement.

Questions people actually ask

01 How much do I need for a down payment?

Less than most people think. Conventional loans start around three percent, FHA at three and a half, and VA and USDA can be zero for those who qualify. Virginia also has down payment assistance programs. Twenty percent avoids mortgage insurance but is not a requirement.

02 When should I start talking to an agent?

Earlier than feels natural. Most of the useful work happens before you're ready to buy: understanding the market, fixing credit, deciding where. Talking to me a year out costs you nothing.

03 How does your commission work?

Buyer agents are now paid under a written agreement you sign before we tour homes, and the amount is negotiable. It may be paid by the seller, by you, or split. I'll walk you through it in plain terms before you sign anything, and there won't be a number you didn't see coming.

04 How long does it take?

The search can be three weeks or nine months, depending on inventory and how specific you are. Once you're under contract, thirty to sixty days to settlement.

05 What credit score do I need?

Many programs start in the mid-600s and some go lower. Your score affects your rate more than your approval, and the difference over thirty years is real. If yours needs work, that's worth knowing now rather than later.

06 Should I wait for rates to drop?

Nobody knows where rates are going, including people who sound certain. What I can tell you is that when rates fall, buyers return and prices tend to follow. Whether waiting helps you depends on your situation, and I'll give you a straight read on it.

Ready when you are.

Whether you're six months out or looking at something this weekend, the first conversation is thirty minutes and costs you nothing. Bring the questions you think are too basic to ask. Those are usually the good ones.

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