

King County Home Buyers Playbook



Your Guide to Buying Real Estate In King County

Preface

Buying a home is one of the most meaningful milestones in a person's life. It represents stability, opportunity, and the chance to create a space that truly reflects who you are and how you want to live. If you are reading this, you are likely beginning or preparing to begin that journey and I am honored to be your guide.

The truth is the home buying process does not have to feel overwhelming. With the right guidance, the right information, and the right advocate in your corner, it becomes an empowering and emotionally and financially rewarding journey.

My goal is simple: to give you clarity, confidence, and support. I am here as a **consultant**, **educator**, and **partner** in this process, whether you are ready to buy next month or next year.

Welcome. Let us begin your journey home.

About the Author

Cheryl Dillon is a Pacific Northwest real estate professional known for her warm, community focused approach and her **client first mindset**. She is passionate about helping people build generational wealth through strategic homeownership. Her deep expertise in the Greater Seattle area markets ensures her clients always have a true local advantage.

Chapter One: Welcome to Homeownership in King County

Your Guide to Buying With Confidence

Buying a home in King County is an exciting, life-changing step whether you're moving to the area for the first time, upgrading, downsizing, or transitioning from renting to owning.

This region offers some of the most diverse neighborhoods, strongest job markets, and most stable long-term housing values in the country. And yet, navigating this landscape can feel overwhelming without the right guidance.

That's exactly why this guide exists.

My goal is simple: to help you feel calm, prepared, and empowered from the moment you begin your search until the day you get your keys — and long after.

This is not a sales pitch.

It's a resource.

A roadmap.

A partnership.

King County Is One of the Most Sought-After Home Markets in the U.S.

It has consistently ranked as one of the best places to build long-term financial stability through real estate. Here's why:

Strong Economy & Job Market

Home to Amazon, Microsoft (nearby in Redmond), Google, Meta, Boeing, and countless startups, King County attracts top talent from around the world.

Exceptional Transit Growth

Light rail expansions, improved bus rapid transit (BRT), and upcoming connections along the Eastside and Seattle make commuting easier than ever.

Lifestyle & Natural Beauty

You'll find mountains, lakes, trails, beaches, parks, charming downtowns, and vibrant dining — all within minutes of each other.

Stable, Long-Term Appreciation

Even when the national market slows, King County continues to show strong resilience, making homeownership an excellent long-term investment.

What Makes Buying in King County Unique

Each county has its own culture, pace, and real estate norms. Here's what sets King County apart:

1. Fast-Moving, Data-Driven Market

Homes here often sell in days, not weeks. Understanding pricing trends, competition levels, and neighborhood dynamics is essential.

2. Diverse Neighborhood Personality

Bothell, Ballard, Bellevue, Capitol Hill, Kirkland, Magnolia, Maple Leaf, Shoreline, Queen Anne, Renton, West Seattle each area has its own rhythm, architecture, school districts, and lifestyle feel.

3. Older Housing Stock Meets New Construction

Seattle has homes built in the 1920s–1960s. The Eastside features homes from the 1980s–2000s plus modern new builds. Different eras = different home styles and different inspection expectations.

4. Micro-Markets That Change Street by Street


One neighborhood can have multiple submarkets, each with unique pricing patterns.

Local Insight:

In King County, you're not just buying a home you're buying into a lifestyle and a pocket of community. My job is to help you discover which area fits

Buying a home isn't just about finding the right property. It's about feeling supported, educated, and confident in every decision.

With me, you'll always receive:

 Clear guidance

- ✓ Step-by-step explanations
- ✓ Protection at every stage
- ✓ Honest advice (even when it's not what you hoped to hear)
- ✓ Hyper-local insight
- ✓ A trusted partner who cares about your goals

I believe informed buyers make empowered homeowners.
And empowered homeowners build long-term wealth and stability.

One important thing to understand is the current zoning in Washington State.

HB 1110 was voted into law in 2023 and went into effect July 1, 2025, changed single-family zoning in many areas, depending on city size and proximity to major transit.

- Cities under 25,000 (e.g., Mukilteo ~21,000): No change; single-family zoning remains.
- 25,000–75,000 (e.g., Edmonds, Bothell):
 - Up to 2 homes per lot, or 4 per lot if within ¼ mile of major transit or one unit is deed-restricted affordable (50 years).
- 75,000+ (e.g., Seattle, Kirkland, Bellevue):
 - Up to 4 homes per lot, or 6 per lot if within ¼ mile of transit or two deed-restricted affordable units (50 years).

Affordable housing generally means:

- Renters at ≤60% of area median income
- Owners at ≤80% of area median income
- Units remain affordable for at least 50 years

Fun fact: In the Seattle area, one of the top motivators for first-time homebuyers—especially millennials—is having a better space for their *dog*. Yes, really.

A Final Word as You Begin This Journey

Think of this guide as your personal roadmap — a clear, friendly, practical companion.

Whether this is your first home, your next home, or your return to homeownership, I want you to know this:

You don't have to do this alone.

King County is an incredible place to build a life, a community, and future wealth through real estate — and I'm honored to help you take that step with confidence, clarity, and excitement.

When you're ready, I'm here.

Chapter Two: Ownership vs Renting

The decision to transition from renting to owning is the single most important financial move a household can make. It transforms fixed expenses into appreciating assets and creates an enduring legacy of wealth.

Homeownership stands as the single most critical factor driving the division of wealth in America, cementing the economic divide between those who own property and those who do not. For the majority of middle-class families, the equity built through a primary residence is their largest—and often only—appreciating asset, creating an essential engine for wealth accumulation that is largely inaccessible to renters. This mechanism of building net worth through principal payments, home appreciation, and favorable tax policies transforms property into financial power, which is then used to fund education, start businesses, and provide intergenerational transfers. Consequently, historically rooted disparities in homeownership rates, particularly along racial and socioeconomic lines, directly translate into the staggering wealth gap, making real estate not just shelter, but the primary structural determinant of who has access to the American dream of financial security.

The current market conditions enhance the wealth-building proposition for buyers:

- **Time to Negotiate:** Unlike a frenzied seller's market, you now have the time to conduct thorough due diligence and inspections, allowing you to avoid costly future repairs and protect your equity.
- **Price Stabilization:** With average prices stabilizing, you are buying into the market at a less volatile time, allowing you to secure a better value and ensuring your long-term investment is grounded in a sound purchase price.

The Market Shift: Opportunity for Buyers

The intense pace of recent years has slowed, ushering in a more **balanced market environment**. This transition is a great opportunity for buyers. While some average prices are stabilizing, you now have the gift of **time** to conduct thorough due diligence, including inspections, without the crushing pressure of ultra short deadlines. This means you can negotiate not only price, but also terms that truly protect your interests.

Financial Readiness

Ask yourself:

- Do I have savings for a down payment or access to down-payment assistance programs (like WSHFC)?
- Can I comfortably afford the monthly payment, taxes, and insurance?
- Am I ready for maintenance responsibilities or should I consider a condo or townhome instead?

When Renting Makes Sense

There are times when renting is the right choice:

- If you expect to move within 1–3 years
- If your income is variable and you're building savings
- If you're exploring different areas before committing to one

Cheryl's Pro Tip

“Most people start by comparing rent to the mortgage payment. But the real magic happens when you compare rent to **future equity**. That's where homeownership becomes life-changing.”

Chapter Three: Why Home Buyers Still Need an Agent in 2025

Many buyers wonder: *“I can search on Zillow myself...do I really need an agent?”* The short answer is yes, and here’s why.

1. Access to the Full Market (Not Just Zillow)

While websites give you a glimpse of available homes, they don't show:

- Off-market opportunities
- Coming-soon listings
- Price changes not yet published
- Neighborhood-level insights that only boots-on-the-ground agents truly know

2. Protection Under Washington State Law

In WA State, buyers now sign a **Buyer Representation Agreement** before touring homes. This assures:

- Transparency regarding how your agent is paid
- Loyalty and fiduciary duties owed to you
- Confidentiality and advocacy from the first conversation
- Clear expectations and consistent guidance

You deserve someone whose only job is to represent your best interests. A listing agent represents the *seller*—not you.

3. Skilled Negotiation in a Competitive Market

The PNW real estate market can be fast, emotional, and competitive. Whether you're navigating a bidding war or negotiating repairs on a townhome, you need someone who understands:

- Pricing strategy
- Seller psychology
- Market timing
- How to write an offer that stands out—without overpaying

The highest is not always the way to win

I once represented a buyer who fell in love with a home that had multiple offers. Instead of pushing them to come in over list price, I advised a creative

strategy using escalation, leveraging things the seller wanted, and timelines. They won without being the highest offer. Strategy matters.

4. Navigating Contracts, Inspections, and Buyer-Risk

A Washington real estate transaction includes:

- The 21-page NWMLS PSA
- Inspection contingencies
- Title review documents
- Form 22E, 22B, 35, 41, 90, and dozens of optional protections

One missed detail can cost thousands.

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

"You don't need to memorize every form—that's my job. I'll walk you through each page and make sure you're always protected and informed."

The Power of Your Partner - Why You Need a REALTOR®

Agent vs. REALTOR®: What's the Difference?

When you begin your home search, you'll encounter people who refer to themselves as real estate agents, brokers, or Realtors. While all licensed individuals are technically "real estate agents" or "brokers," only those who are members of the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR) can use the registered trademark REALTOR®.

Choosing a REALTOR® means you are working with an individual who adheres to a strict Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. This commitment goes above and beyond state licensing requirements, ensuring your representative is bound to uphold your best interests, confidentiality, and fairness throughout the entire transaction. In a process this significant, that commitment to a higher ethical standard is invaluable.

The Fiduciary Difference: Your Exclusive Advocate

Buying a home is the largest financial transaction most people will ever undertake. Unlike buying a car or other retail purchases, the complexity of real estate demands professional legal and financial representation.

As a buyer, your REALTOR® is bound by a Fiduciary Duty, which is a legal term meaning they must act solely in your best financial and personal interests. This duty is the core reason you need your own agent and includes several key responsibilities:

- Loyalty: Your agent must put your interests above everyone else's, including their own.
- Confidentiality: All private information you share (e.g., how much you are *really* willing to pay, personal financial details) must be protected.
- Disclosure: They must disclose all relevant facts they know that might affect your decision (e.g., neighborhood issues, potential property defects).
- Reasonable Care and Diligence: They must provide expert advice, guide you through complex paperwork, and ensure all steps are completed correctly and on time.

Your values, priorities, lifestyle, commute, pets, routines, finances, and long-term goals all matter.

I take time to learn **you** because buying a home isn't just about data. It's about building a future. You deserve a partner who handles the details so you can focus on the joy.

Buying a home isn't just a financial decision—it's a lifestyle decision. Before we talk neighborhoods, budgets, or home tours, we need to get crystal clear about what matters most to you. This is where the home-buying journey really begins.

Needs vs. Wants: What's the Difference?

Needs are the non-negotiables. They support your safety, daily routines, family structure, finances, and long-term goals.

Wants enhance your life, however they aren't deal-breakers especially if this is a starter home.

Needs (Examples):

- Number of bedrooms for your household
- Location/commute radius
- Budget that protects your financial stability
- Safety and neighborhood feel
- Pet requirements (yard, flooring, nearby walking areas)
- Accessibility (stairs vs. no stairs)
- Proximity to schools or essential services

Wants (Examples):

- Walk-in pantry
- Fully fenced yard
- Quartz countertops
- Designer finishes
- Vaulted ceilings
- Garage storage or shop space

It's okay to want it all and it's normal if many items feel like "needs." However when we prioritize early, decision-making becomes much easier later.

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

"Think about your future self. What will matter to you 3–5 years from now?
Buying based only on today's lifestyle is how people outgrow homes quickly."

Consider Lifestyle

For most buyers, lifestyle—not layout—is the real driving force behind the perfect home.

Ask yourself:

- How do I spend my mornings and evenings?
- Do I host friends often?
- Do I work from home?
- Do I crave quiet, walkability, or both?
- How important is natural light?
- Do I prefer newer construction or charm and character?

Once lifestyle is clear, home features follow naturally.

Chapter Four: Financing Fundamentals

Financing is one of the most important parts of buying a home. The right loan program can save you tens of thousands of dollars over time, increase your buying power, and help you move into your new home with confidence.

In this chapter, we'll simplify the financing process, explain your options, break down common myths, and dive into the Washington State Housing Finance Commission (WSHFC) programs that help thousands of Washington buyers become homeowners every year.

My goal: **to empower you—not overwhelm you.**

Understanding your finances is the single most empowering step in the home buying process. This information allows us to set a realistic budget and positions you as a **stronger buyer** in the eyes of sellers.

Pre-Qualification vs. Pre-Approval

These terms matter when making an offer.

Pre-Qualification:

- Quick conversation
- Estimates your budget
- Not verified

Pre-Approval:

- Lender verifies income, credit, assets
- Stronger in the eyes of sellers
- Required to write competitive offers

In 2025, sellers overwhelmingly prefer **fully underwritten approvals**—they're faster and reduce uncertainty.

The Power of Preapproval

A **preapproval letter** from a trusted local lender is not the same as a prequalification. It is a commitment based on a full review of your finances, including income, assets, and credit. This is arguably the most important document you will have when submitting an offer.

Key Financial Terms to Know

- **Down Payment:** This is the percentage of the purchase price you pay upfront. Options range from 0% to 3% to 20% or more, depending on the loan type.
- **Closing Costs:** These are fees associated with the transaction, typically 2% to 5% of the loan amount, covering title services, appraisal, insurance, and other items.
- **Loan Programs:** There are many programs designed for our region, including Conventional, FHA, and VA loans, as well as assistance programs through the **WSHFC** Washington State Housing Finance Commission. We can connect you with lenders who specialize in these local programs.

Understanding Your Loan Options & Down Payment: How Much Do You Really Need?

The myth: You need 20% down.

The truth: You can buy a home with **0–5% down** depending on the loan type.

Your down payment options:

- 0% (VA, USDA)
- 3% (Conventional)
- 3.5% (FHA)
- 5–10% (common choice for strong borrowers)
- 20% (to avoid PMI)

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

"Don't let the down payment stop you. Explore your options first—you may qualify for more than you think."

There are five primary loan types used in Washington State. Each one serves a different kind of buyer. There's a lot of confusion online about how much you need to put down especially for government-backed loans. Here's the simple, accurate breakdown:

1. Conventional Loans

These are the most common loans for buyers with solid credit and stable income.

Key Features:

- Minimum down payment: **3–5%**

- No upfront mortgage insurance fee
- PMI (private mortgage insurance) can be removed later
- Strong choice for buyers with 700+ credit scores

Best for: Buyers with good credit who want long-term flexibility.

2. FHA Loans

A great option for buyers with moderate credit or lower down payments.

Key Features:

- Minimum down payment: **3.5** %
- More flexible credit requirements minimum 580
- Higher debt to income ratios
- Slightly higher mortgage insurance
- Allows for gift funds

Best for: First-time buyers who qualify and need flexibility.

3. VA Loans

If you qualify for a VA loan, it is hands-down one of the best loan products available. Incredible benefits for eligible veterans, active-duty military, and surviving spouses.

Key Features:

- **0%** down payment
- No mortgage insurance
- Competitive rates
- Flexible credit standards

Best for: Those with VA eligibility.

4. USDA Loans

Designed for rural areas (certain Snohomish County pockets qualify).

Key Features:

- **0%** down payment
- Location- and income-based eligibility

- Competitive rates

Best for: Buyers open to rural locations.

5. Jumbo Loans

For high-priced homes above conforming loan limits.

Key Features:

- Higher credit score requirements
- Larger down payments
- Competitive with strong borrowers

Best for: Luxury or high-end buyers.

Interest Rates & Buying Power

Interest rates fluctuate—sometimes weekly. Instead of trying to “time the market,” focus on affordability.

Every 1% increase in interest rate reduces buying power by **8–10%**.

Cheryl’s Pro Tip:

“Marry the house, date the rate. You can always refinance—your dream home won’t wait.”

Choosing the Right Lender

A strong local lender can make or break your offer.

Local lenders offer:

- Faster communication
- Familiarity with local appraisers
- Better relationships with listing agents
- More accurate closing timelines

Avoid This Mistake:

Big national online lenders often cause delays—and listing agents know it.

Washington State Housing Finance Commission (WSHFC) Down Payment Assistance Section

The Washington State Housing Finance Commission (WSHFC) provides one of the most powerful and accessible down payment assistance programs in the country. Thousands of Washington buyers—especially first-time buyers—use these programs every year to bridge the gap between renting and homeownership.

If you've ever felt like buying a home was out of reach because of the down payment, WSHFC might be the key that finally opens that door.

What Is WSHFC?

WSHFC is a state-run program that provides:

- Affordable first mortgage options
- Zero-interest down payment assistance loans
- Special programs for veterans, low-to-moderate income households, and buyers with disabilities
- Free homebuyer education (I teach the Realtor section!)

WSHFC isn't a lender. Instead, they partner with **Commission-trained lenders** who handle the loan itself. You and I work closely with the lender to make sure everything aligns with your goals and your financial comfort.

How WSHFC Down Payment Assistance Works

All WSHFC down payment assistance programs are structured as **0% interest, deferred payment loans**.

That means:

- **No monthly payments**
- **No interest accrues**
- You repay the assistance only when you sell, refinance, or pay off your mortgage

This allows you to buy a home with significantly less out-of-pocket cash while keeping your savings intact.

Homebuyer Education Requirement

To qualify, you must take the **WSHFC Homebuyer Education Course**—and I teach the Realtor portion of this class.

You will learn:

- How financing works
- What to expect during your home search
- How to protect yourself during inspection
- How to choose the right loan
- How to compare monthly payments
- How DPA works step-by-step

This class is free and can be taken online or in person.

Is WSHFC Right for You?

WSHFC may be perfect if:

- You have stable income but lack the full down payment
- You want to preserve savings for emergency funds or home repairs
- You plan to stay in the home for at least 2–3 years
- You feel overwhelmed by the idea of saving 5–20% down

It may not be ideal if:

- You're in a competitive bidding situation and need maximum leverage
- You qualify for a significantly better rate without assistance
- You're purchasing a property that doesn't allow DPA (rare but possible)

Turning “I Don't Have Enough Saved” Into Keys in Hand

There are so many success stories. One recent is a single parent who had a good stable job and very little savings.

With WSHFC's Home Advantage program and down payment assistance, she was able to buy a beautiful home with a payment well within their comfort zone. She didn't drain their savings. She didn't wait for years. She became a homeowner with security, stability, and space for their child to thrive.

That is what WSHFC is designed to do: create opportunity.

Chapter Five: The Search and Due Diligence

The excitement of touring homes must be tempered with **strategic evaluation**. We will look at homes through two lenses: the heart's desire and the investor's eye.

What to Look For

We will focus on four crucial elements:

1. **Location:** Beyond the neighborhood, we look at the specific street, the proximity to schools, and future development plans.
2. **Floorplan and Functionality:** Does the layout support your lifestyle, now and in the future?
3. **Condition:** This is where due diligence shines. We look for potential red flags related to the roof, foundation, and major systems.
4. **Value:** We compare the asking price against comparable sales in the immediate area to ensure you are making a **smart investment**.

Start Online, And Don't Trust Everything You See

Real estate websites are a great starting point, but they only show part of the story. Photos can hide flaws, make rooms appear larger, or leave out key details. Conversely, some incredible homes are listed with poor photos and are overlooked.

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

Don't eliminate a home solely based on photos—many gems in the PNW are hidden behind bad photography. Sometimes these are the best deals because other people skip right over them.

The First Tour: Big Picture Evaluation

When touring a home for the first time, focus on:

- Overall layout and flow
- Natural light (PNW winters make this crucial!)
- Street noise and neighborhood feel
- Lot orientation
- General condition of systems and structure
- Commute and lifestyle factors

Avoid fixating on cosmetic details. Paint, flooring, and light fixtures are easy to change. Layout, location, and light are not.

The Second Tour: Details That Matter

If you're considering writing an offer, the second tour is your time to dig deeper.

Check:

- Window seals (look for fogging or streaking)
- Siding (LP, T1-11, fiber cement)
- Attic access points
- Crawl space smell or signs of moisture
- Water pressure
- Age of roof, furnace, water heater
- Driveway slope and drainage patterns
- Neighbor proximity and privacy

Key PNW Red Flags to Watch For

Living in the Pacific Northwest means being aware of issues unique to our climate.

Common red flags include:

- Musty odor (crawl space moisture)
- Soft spots in flooring
- Mismatched siding repairs
- Failing window seals
- Standing water in yard
- Grading that slopes toward the home

Should You Bring Friends or Family to Tours?

Loved ones can offer support—but too many opinions can cloud your judgment. Bring only people who understand YOUR priorities.

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

"The biggest mistake buyers make is letting someone who isn't buying the home talk them out of a great one or into a wrong one."

Evaluating Condos and Townhomes

When touring condos or townhomes, pay particular attention to:

- Sound transfer between units
- Parking and guest parking

- Hallway smell and cleanliness
- Building age and reserve study
- HOA rules and restrictions

Avoid This Mistake:

Don't assume the HOA is strong just because dues are high. Strong HOAs have clear financial planning—not just high monthly fees.

One thing that is important to consider is there a rental cap. This may not be top of mind now, however, life changes and it is always good to have that option if needed in the future.

How to Compare Homes Like a Pro

Create a comparison grid for each home:

- Price vs. condition
- Commute time
- Layout functionality
- Yard usability
- Light exposure
- Long-term resale potential
- Proximity to amenities
- Cost of potential updates

This helps remove emotion and makes the decision clearer.

The House That Looked Too Small

I once toured a home with buyers who thought it felt too small because the seller had so much stuff. When we measured the room with their actual furniture measurements. Turns out it worked perfectly. They wrote an offer, and today it's their forever home.

Lesson: First impressions matter, and second visits reveal the truth.

The Most Important Question After Every Tour

Ask yourself:

“Can I picture my life here?”

If the answer is yes we may have found the one. If not, keep going. The right home is out there.

Washington State Buyer Agency

In Washington, buyer agency is governed by specific rules. As your agent, I can give you guidance however the ultimate decision will always rest with you. I am your exclusive advocate. This means I have a **fiduciary duty** to you. My mission is to always represent your best financial and personal interests, from the initial search to the closing table.

Chapter Six: Winning the Offer

Once you've found "the one," it's time to talk about strategy. Making an offer is both an art and a science. The goal is simple: **write an offer that gives you the best chance of winning without overpaying or sacrificing your protections.** In a competitive market, a strong offer is more than just a high price. It is about presenting a **complete, clean, and compelling package** that meets the seller's needs.

When crafting your offer, we consider:

- Current market conditions
- Comparable sales ("comps")
- Seller motivations
- The home's condition
- Competition level
- Your financing strength
- Any contingencies needed to protect you

This strategic, holistic approach is how we write offers that sellers trust **without compromising your interests.**

Winning Without Being the Highest Offer

My clients fell in love with a home listed in the low \$900s. There were seven offers.

Instead of going far above list price, we structured:

- A clean, well-written offer
- Strong earnest money
- Tight inspection window
- Local lender
- Clear communication with the listing agent

When the seller reviewed offers, ours wasn't the highest—but it was the strongest.

We won the home over the offers.

10. My Promise When Writing Your Offer

When you're ready to write an offer, I will:

- Explain every option and risk
- Protect your interests at every step
- Use clear data to guide pricing
- Advocate fiercely for you
- Communicate personally with the listing agent
- Keep emotions calm, grounded, and strategic

You're never doing this alone. I'm right there with you the whole way. We will start by:

1. Determining the Right Price

How we evaluate price:

- Recently sold comparable homes within 0.25–1 mile
- Differences in upgrades, age, lot size, schools
- Market momentum (speed of sales, price trends)
- Whether this home is underpriced to spark a bidding war (common in the PNW)

I will always show you:

- The home's estimated fair market value
- The expected competition level
- The price range needed to win
- The “walk away” point if bidding gets unrealistic

2. Earnest Money: Showing Serious Intent

Earnest money is typically **1–3%** of the purchase price in King/Snohomish counties.

It is:

- Held in escrow
- Applied toward your down payment or closing costs
- Protected as long as your contingencies are in place

This deposit communicates to the seller that you're committed and it strengthens your offer.

3. Inspection Contingency (Form 35)

In Washington, this is one of your strongest buyer protections.

Your inspection contingency gives you the right to:

- Hire a licensed inspector
- Discover any issues with the home
- Ask for repairs or credits on bigger items
- Walk away if major problems arise and are not able to be negotiated

Local Insight:

If your new home will have a crawl space, these require specialized inspections to identify moisture, vapor barrier issues, and drainage concerns.

Never skip the sewer scope.

Root intrusion is extremely common in older homes.

4. The Escalation Clause (Form 35E)

This is a powerful tool when used correctly.

What an escalation clause does:

It automatically increases your offer above competing offers up to a maximum amount.

When to use it:

- True multiple-offer situations
- Underpriced homes designed to attract quick bidding wars

When NOT to use it:

- When the home is fairly priced and unlikely to have multiple offers
- When you want full control over your price strategy

Avoid This Mistake:

Don't escalate without clear proof of the competing offer. NWMLS requires the seller to provide documentation.

5. Financing Contingency (Form 22A)

This protects you in case your lender cannot finalize your loan.

2025 tip: Work with a **local lender** whenever possible—listing agents heavily prefer them.

Why local lenders strengthen your offer:

- Faster communication
- Faster underwriting
- More reliable pre-approvals
- Familiarity with local appraisers
- Better reputation with listing agents

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

A strong local lender letter can beat a higher-priced offer with an unreliable out-of-state lender.

6. Appraisal Contingency

In a competitive market, the appraisal can make or break a deal.

Appraisers determine whether the home is worth what you're offering for it.

Your options when writing an offer:

- Include appraisal contingency (safer)
- Waive it entirely (riskier)
- Partially waive (bridge the gap up to a set amount)

I will NEVER recommend waiving unless:

- You have the cash to cover a gap
- The comps clearly support value
- The home is unlikely to appraise low

7. The Offer Timeline

Once your offer is submitted, the seller may:

- Accept
- Reject
- Counter

Typical seller response time is **24–48 hours**, though hot properties may review sooner.

If we receive a counteroffer, we'll discuss strategy before responding.

8. What Makes an Offer Stand Out to Sellers (Without Overpaying)

Here are elements that sellers LOVE in 2025:

- Strong local lender
- Tight inspection timeline (while keeping your protection!)
- Clean offer with minimal unnecessary contingencies
- A thoughtfully structured escalation clause (if needed)
- A solid earnest money deposit
- Buyers who stay within clear timelines

Closing the Deal

Once your offer is accepted, we move swiftly through the closing process, coordinating with title, escrow, and your lender. My team and I monitor every deadline to ensure a smooth, stress free experience right up to the moment you receive the **keys to your new home**.

Chapter Seven: Inspections & Due Diligence

Once your offer is accepted, we enter one of the most important phases of your home purchase: **due diligence**. This is where we confirm the condition of the home, uncover hidden issues, and make sure you understand exactly what you're buying. In the Pacific Northwest—where moisture, soil conditions, and aging homes are common—this step is absolutely essential.

My job during inspections is simple: **protect your investment, reduce surprises, and negotiate on your behalf when issues arise.**

Why Inspections Matter (Especially in Washington State)

Even when a home looks beautiful on the surface, inspections reveal the truth. A professional home inspector evaluates hundreds of items and gives you a detailed report so you can make informed decisions.

In the PNW, inspections are even more critical because of:

- High moisture levels
- Common crawl spaces
- Older sewer lines
- Tree root intrusion
- Wood rot
- Mold and mildew potential
- Varied building standards from the 1950s–2020s

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

“When in doubt, inspect. The cost of an inspection is tiny compared to the cost of missing a major defect.”

The Core Inspections Every Buyer Needs

Below are the inspections most buyers should consider in King & Snohomish Counties.

1. General Home Inspection

This is your primary inspection and covers:

- Roof
- Attic

- Crawl space
- Plumbing
- Electrical
- Foundation
- Exterior siding
- Windows
- HVAC systems
- Water heater
- Major appliances

Inspectors flag issues as:

- **Minor** (maintenance items)
- **Moderate** (should be addressed soon)
- **Major** (health/safety or expensive repairs)

2. Sewer Scope Inspection

This is *non-negotiable*, especially in:

- Bothell
- Seattle & Shoreline
- Edmonds
- Mountlake Terrace
- Older neighborhoods built before 1990

A scope uses a camera to inspect the sewer line for:

- Cracks
- Settling
- Tree root intrusion (VERY common in the PNW)
- Old clay or Orangeburg pipes

Avoid This Mistake:

Never skip a sewer scope—repairing a sewer line costs \$10,000–\$30,000.

3. Pest / WDO Inspection

A Wood-Destroying Organism inspection looks for:

- Termites (more common in Snohomish County than people think!)
- Carpenter ants

- Rodents
- Beetles
- Wood rot

Wood rot is extremely common in the PNW due to moisture.

4. Roof Inspection

Roof life in the PNW varies:

- **Composition/asphalt roofs:** 18–25 years
- **Cedar shake:** 25–40 years
- **Metal roofs:** 50+ years

A roof nearing end-of-life can be a major negotiation point.

5. Chimney & Fireplace Inspection

Many older Seattle-area homes have aging masonry chimneys that are cracked, leaning, or need re-lining.

If you plan to use the fireplace, this inspection is essential.

6. Oil Tank Search

Homes built before 1960 may have buried oil tanks. These are environmental hazards.

If a tank is present, you may need:

- Soil testing
- Decommissioning
- Removal

All of these can be negotiated during due diligence.

7. Septic Inspection (If Applicable)

Many homes outside city limits use septic systems.

Septic inspections include:

- Pumping
- Dye test

- Checking baffles
- Evaluating drain field health

A failing system is a **\$20k–\$40k** repair.

Common PNW Issues to Expect

Here are things that are totally normal—and not deal-breakers:

- Moss on the roof
- Minor rodent activity in attic or crawl
- Fogged windows
- Loose handrails
- Small cracks in drywall

And here are things that require more caution:

- Standing water in crawl space
- Active leaks
- Mold on insulation or joists
- Unsafe electrical panels
- Failing roof
- Evidence of foundation settlement

How to Read an Inspection Report Without Panic

PNW inspection reports can be LONG—often 40–70 pages.

But remember:

- Many issues are common
- Inspectors list everything, even minor items
- Not every issue is urgent or expensive

I'll help you identify:

- What's cosmetic
- What's routine maintenance
- What's a real concern
- What's negotiable

Negotiating After the Inspection

Once we know the full condition of the home, we can:

- Request repairs
- Request seller credits
- Request price reductions
- Ask for specialist evaluations
- Or walk away if major issues appear

In 2025, many sellers prefer giving **credits** over repairs—allowing you to choose your contractor and ensure it's done correctly.

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

I always negotiate with your long-term investment in mind—not the seller's convenience.

The Goal of Due Diligence

The goal isn't to find a flawless home. No such home exists.

The goal is to understand:

- The home's true condition
- What repairs are needed now vs. later
- How to negotiate fairly
- Whether the home is still a good investment

When you know what you're buying, you can move forward with confidence.

Chapter Eight: Appraisals & Underwriting What Really Happens Behind the Scenes

Once your offer is accepted and inspections are complete, your loan enters the appraisal and underwriting phase. This is where the lender confirms the value of the home, verifies your financials, and ensures the loan meets all guidelines. When you understand this part of the process, everything feels calmer and more predictable.

What Is an Appraisal — And Why Does It Matter?

An appraisal is a professional estimate of the home's market value, conducted by a licensed appraiser who is chosen by your lender.

It ensures that:

- **The home is worth what you're paying**
- **The lender isn't lending more than the property is worth**
- **The purchase is financially sound**

What Appraisers Look At

- **Recently sold comparable homes ("comps")**
- **Square footage & layout**
- **Condition of the home**
- **Lot size, topography, and orientation**
- **Local school district & neighborhood demand**
- **Market trends**

Pacific Northwest Considerations

Appraisers also watch for:

- **Roof age**
- **Crawl space conditions**
- **Drainage issues**
- **Proximity to freeways (noise levels)**
- **Construction quality trends by decade**

What If the Appraisal Comes in Low?

This is called an appraisal shortfall. It happens when the appraiser values the home below the agreed purchase price.

If the appraisal is low, we can:

- **Ask the seller to reduce the price**
- **Meet in the middle**
- **Provide additional comparable sales to challenge the appraisal**
- **Increase the down payment to bridge the gap**
- **Walk away (if your appraisal contingency protects you)**

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

"A low appraisal isn't a failure, it's a negotiation."

Waiving or Partially Waiving the Appraisal

In competitive PNW markets, some buyers choose to waive or partially waive the appraisal contingency.

Types of waivers:

- **Full waiver: You cover any gap**
- **Partial waiver: You cover up to a specific amount**
- **Traditional contingency: Full protection**

I will never recommend a full or partial waiver unless:

- **You have cash reserves**
- **We've reviewed market data**
- **The home is extremely likely to appraise**
- **You understand the risks**

What Is Underwriting?

Underwriting is the lender's final review of your financial documentation and the home itself.

This is where the lender verifies that you qualify for the loan and the property qualifies as acceptable collateral.

Underwriters Review:

- Income and employment
- Tax documents
- Bank statements & assets
- Credit history
- Debt-to-income ratio
- Appraisal report
- Title report
- Loan program requirements

Common Underwriting Conditions (Don't Panic!)

Almost every buyer receives underwriting requests such as:

- Updated pay stubs
- Clarification letters
- Proof of large deposits
- Updated bank statements
- Verification of insurance

This is completely normal.

Avoid This Mistake:

Don't open new credit lines, change jobs, or move money between accounts during underwriting.

Why Underwriters Ask for More Information

It's not personal.

Underwriters are required to:

- Reduce risk
- Ensure stability
- Verify all funds
- Comply with federal and investor rules

I'll help you respond quickly and correctly.

How We Keep Underwriting Smooth

Behind the scenes, I:

- **Coordinate with your lender**
- **Confirm appraisal and underwriting timelines**
- **Ensure conditions are handled quickly**
- **Communicate with the listing agent**
- **Keep you informed at every step**

A calm, proactive approach prevents 90% of last-minute issues.

Clear to Close

Once the underwriter signs off on every condition, you're officially:

Clear to Close

This means:

- **Your loan is fully approved**
- **Your closing documents are being prepared**
- **We're days away from you getting the keys to your new home**

You're almost there.

Chapter Nine: Closing Day & What to Expect

Closing day is the moment everything becomes real — the day you officially become a homeowner. While it's exciting, it can also feel unfamiliar if you've never been through it before. This chapter walks you through the process step-by-step so you know exactly what will happen, when you'll get your keys, and how to prepare with confidence.

What “Closing” Actually Means in Washington

In Washington State, closing is usually a two-day process:

1. Signing Day – You sign closing documents with escrow.
2. Recording / Funding Day – Your loan funds, the deed records with the county, and *you officially own the home*.

You receive your keys after recording, not at signing.

1. Signing Day (Escrow Appointment)

This usually happens 1–2 days before the actual closing.

You will sign:

- The Closing Disclosure (CD)
- Promissory Note
- Deed of Trust
- Loan documents
- Final settlement statement
- Escrow paperwork

Signing takes about 45–60 minutes.

Where do you sign?

- Usually at the escrow office
- Or at your home with a mobile notary
- Occasionally electronically (depending on loan type & situation)

What you need to bring:

- Government-issued ID
- Any items escrow specifically requests

- A cashier's check *only if* your lender didn't wire funds

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

**Always bring the same ID you used during the loan application.
Lenders require matching documentation.**

2. Final Walkthrough

Typically the day before closing or the morning of we do a final walkthrough to ensure:

- The home is in the same condition as when you offered
- Any agreed-upon repairs were completed
- No new damage has occurred
- The sellers have moved out (unless agreed otherwise)

Final Walkthrough Checklist:

- Lights, outlets, and appliances working
- Toilets flushing, sinks draining
- No leaks under sinks
- Heat/AC functioning
- Garage doors and remotes working
- Windows open and close properly
- No leftover trash or debris

If something is wrong, we address it immediately with the seller's agent before recording.

Closing Day Curveball

A buyer and I arrived at the final walkthrough of a home the morning of closing. My client was the buyer. The home was in serious disrepair and he was paying cash because no lender would loan on it.

It was winter and when we arrived for the walkthrough we discovered a pipe in the ceiling had burst and flooded the home. Unfortunately this is not the only time I have seen this happen. In this situation even though the home was bank owned as is and in really rough shape we were able to negotiate a lower price to cover paying for the new

damage as this was not the condition my client had purchased the home in.

We had a slight delay in closing, however we were able to get it taken care of and move forward.

4. The Closing Disclosure (CD)

You must receive your CD at least 3 days before signing.

This federally required waiting period protects you and gives time to review your final loan terms.

The CD includes:

- Loan amount
- Monthly payment
- Interest rate
- Closing costs
- Cash-to-close
- Loan program details

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

Always compare the CD to your original loan estimate. I review it with you to make sure every number makes sense.

5. Funding & Recording Day

This is the big one.

What happens:

- The lender wires funds to escrow
- Escrow balances and finalizes documents
- The deed is sent to the county
- The county records the deed
- You officially become the owner

When do you get the keys?

After the county confirms recording.

This usually happens between 12pm and 4pm, depending on the county workload.

In King and Snohomish counties, recordings often occur early afternoon.

Local Insight:

Fridays and holidays can delay recording — we plan your timeline accordingly.

6. When Sellers Must Move Out

In Washington, unless otherwise negotiated, sellers must move out by 9pm on the day of recording.

Most sellers are already out earlier, but we structure your contract to protect your move-in timeline.

7. What Happens After You Sign (But Before You Get Keys)

This is a short waiting period where:

- **Escrow packages documents**
- **Lender reviews for final approval**
- **Funds are wired**
- **County receives the deed**

You don't need to do anything here — I monitor the entire process and keep you updated.

8. Your Closing Day Checklist

Before Signing:

- **Review your closing documents**
- **Confirm your cash-to-close**
- **Don't move money or change jobs**
- **Verify wire instructions (beware of wire fraud!)**

Day of Signing:

- **Bring your ID**
- **Allow 60 minutes**
- **Ask questions!**

Day of Recording:

- **I will contact you as soon as we're official**
- **Plan for afternoon keys**
- **Coordinate movers for the evening or next day.**

9. Celebrate — You're a Homeowner!

Once recording is confirmed:

- **I hand you your keys**
- **You take your first photo in front of your new home**
- **We toast to your new chapter**
- **You step into a lifetime of stability, equity, and opportunity**

This moment is special and I'm honored to guide you to it.

Chapter Ten: After You Move In What Every Homeowner Should Know

You've closed, you've celebrated, and now you're officially a homeowner.

This next phase is all about settling in, protecting your investment, and establishing the habits that keep your home healthy and happy for years to come.

This chapter walks you through what to do in the first week, first month, and first year — with special tips tailored for Pacific Northwest homes.

1. Your First Week in the Home

A. Change Your Locks

Even if the sellers were wonderful, you never know who has extra keys.

B. Test All Smoke & Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Replace batteries and confirm everything works.

C. Update Utilities & Services

Make sure you've set up:

- **Electricity**
- **Gas**
- **Water & sewer**
- **Garbage & recycling**
- **Internet**
- **Home security (optional)**

D. Locate the “Big Three”:

- **Electrical panel**
- **Water main shut-off**
- **Gas shut-off valve**

Knowing these locations can prevent major emergencies.

E. Change your toilet seat or the whole toilet

2. First Month Checklist

A. Deep Clean & Replace Filters

- Furnace filter
- Dryer vent
- Range hood filter
- Dishwasher filter

B. Register Your Appliances

Many appliances have manufacturer warranties you can activate.

C. Review Your Home Maintenance Binder

I provide one for my clients — but if you don't have one, we can create one together.

D. Walk the Perimeter

Check for:

- Drainage issues
- Gutter debris
- Broken sprinkler heads
- Overgrown vegetation touching siding

Local Insight:

In the PNW, moss grows *fast*. Treat it early to avoid roof damage.

3. Protecting Your Home Investment

A. Schedule Seasonal Maintenance

In Washington, moisture + time = most major home issues.
Use this simple schedule:

Spring

- Clean gutters
- Check roof & flashing
- Inspect crawl space for moisture
- Service HVAC system

Summer

- Clean dryer vent
- Check exterior caulking
- Power wash walkways
- Trim trees away from roof

Fall

- Replace furnace filter
- Clean gutters again
- Prepare outdoor faucets for winter
- Check for drafts around windows

Winter

- Monitor for ice dams
- Keep exterior drains clear
- Test sump pumps
- Watch for condensation on windows

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

“A \$15 furnace filter protects a \$10,000 HVAC system. Replace it every 3 months in the PNW.”

4. Understanding Homeowner Tax Benefits

As a homeowner, you may qualify for:

- Mortgage interest deduction
- Property tax deduction
- Energy efficiency credits
- Federal tax benefits for improvements

Always consult your tax professional for specifics.

5. Homestead Exemption (Washington State)

Washington allows homeowners to protect a portion of their home's value from certain creditors.

Why it matters:

- **Protects equity**
- **Free to file**
- **Gives peace of mind**

You can file online or through your county assessor's office.

6. Setting Up Your Homeowner Systems

A. Emergency Fund

I recommend keeping 3–6 months of expenses (or at least \$2,000–\$4,000 for basic home repairs).

B. Maintenance Fund

Aim to save 1–3% of your home's value per year for upgrades and repairs.

C. Home Improvement Plan

Make a wish list:

- **Must-do repairs**
- **Should-do improvements**
- **Future dream projects**

We can walk through this list together anytime.

7. Take Advantage of Your Local Community

Living in the PNW means endless opportunities for connection.

Building relationships early helps you feel at home faster.

8. Cheryl Story: The Homeowner Who Saved Thousands

One of my first-time buyers moved into their home and a few months later noticed a faint musty smell. Instead of ignoring it, they called me.

We discovered a small leak under the water heater that could have caused crawl space moisture issues if left unchecked.

Because they caught it early, repairs cost less than \$200 — not thousands.

Small habits protect big investments.

9. Welcome Home — I'm Here Long After Closing

My relationship with you doesn't end when you get your keys.

I'm here for:

- **Contractor recommendations**
- **Market updates**
- **Annual home value checks**
- **Home improvement ideas**
- **Refinancing questions**
- **Neighborhood info**
- **Check-ins just to say hello**

You're part of my community now — and I'm honored to support you as your life unfolds in your new home.

Chapter Eleven: Resources, Glossary & Staying Connected

As your homeownership journey continues, you deserve ongoing support, easy access to trusted professionals, and a clear understanding of the terms and tools available to you.

This final chapter brings everything together — your go-to resources, local

vendor recommendations, a glossary of common terms, and a warm invitation to stay connected long after closing.

1. Trusted Local Vendors & Home Services

Here is a curated list of professionals my buyers have loved and trusted.
(If you ever need someone not on this list, I have an extensive referral network — just ask!)

Home Services

- Home Inspectors
- Sewer Scope Specialists
- Roofers
- Electricians
- Plumbers
- HVAC Technicians
- Painters
- General Contractors
- Landscapers & Yard Care
- House Cleaners
- Window Repair & Replacement

Financial Services

- WSHFC-approved lenders
- Local credit unions
- Insurance agents
- Tax advisors (homeowner-friendly)

Move-In Support

- Movers
- Junk removal
- Carpet cleaners
- Organizing professionals

Cheryl's Pro Tip:

“The right contractor can save you thousands. Always ask me for referrals — I’m happy to connect you.”

2. Homeowner Tools & Websites

County Resources

- **King County Parcel Viewer**
- **Snohomish County Assessor**
- **Local utility districts**
- **School district boundary tools**

Homeownership Tools

- **Homestead Exemption forms**
- **PNW home maintenance checklists**
- **Emergency preparedness guides**
- **Energy rebate and weatherization programs**

My Personal Resources for You

- **Annual Home Valuation Check**
- **Market updates tailored to your neighborhood**
- **Vendor updates**
- **Community event invitations**
- **Seasonal homeowner reminders**

3. Glossary of Common Real Estate Terms

Appraisal

A professional opinion of value used by your lender to confirm the home's worth.

Appraisal Contingency

A contract clause that protects you if the home appraises for less than the purchase price.

Closing Disclosure (CD)

A final document outlining loan terms, closing costs, and cash-to-close. Must be provided 3+ days before signing.

Closing / Recording

The legal transfer of ownership, confirmed by the county.

Contingency

A condition that must be met for the sale to proceed. Examples: inspection, financing, appraisal.

DTI (Debt-to-Income Ratio)

Percentage of monthly income that goes toward debts; used by lenders to determine qualification.

Down Payment Assistance (DPA)

Programs (like WSHFC) that help buyers cover down payment and closing costs.

Earnest Money

A deposit showing good faith when making an offer. Typically 1–3% of the purchase price.

Equity

The portion of the home you truly “own.” Equity grows as the home value increases or the loan balance decreases.

Escrow

A neutral third party that handles closing, documents, and funds.

Inspection Contingency

Allows buyers to inspect the home and negotiate repairs, credits, or walk away if major issues are discovered.

PMI (Private Mortgage Insurance)

Insurance required on loans with less than 20% down (Conventional loans only).

Pre-Approval

Verification of your financial ability to borrow — stronger than pre-qualification and required to submit offers.

Title Report

A document showing legal ownership, liens, easements, and property details.

4. What Happens Next After You Close

**Your homeownership journey doesn't stop with the keys.
Here's what to expect as we continue to stay connected:**

Every Year

- **Annual home value review**
- **Market updates tailored to your neighborhood**
- **Seasonal maintenance reminders**
- **Updated vendor recommendations**

Anytime

- **Remodel planning & budgeting**
- **Contractor referrals**
- **Investment property questions**
- **Neighborhood insights**
- **Buying or selling guidance**
- **Requests for a CMA (Comparative Market Analysis)**

I'm here as your long-term real estate partner — not just your agent.

5. Cheryl's Final Message

Buying a home is more than a transaction, it's the beginning of a new chapter in your life.

A new place to grow, create memories, build wealth, and feel grounded.

I'm honored to walk beside you every step of the way.

Whether you need:

- **Advice**
- **A contractor**
- **Market insight**
- **A second opinion**
- **A friendly check-in**

- Or help with your next real estate chapter

I'm always here for you.

You're not just a past client.

You're part of my real estate family.

A Note on Referrals — Even Out of State

If you ever have friends, family, coworkers, or neighbors who are thinking about buying or selling I would be honored to help them.

Even if they live outside Washington, or are moving out of state, I can personally connect them to a trustworthy, high-performing agent anywhere in the U.S. or even internationally.

I have a strong referral network of agents who share my values, work ethic, and client-first mindset.

Your introductions mean the world to me, and I promise to take exceptional care of anyone you send my way.

Next Steps (For Readers Who Are Just Getting to Know Me)

If you're reading this guide after visiting an open house, downloading it from my website, or being referred by a friend, welcome.

I'm truly glad you're here.

Buying a home is a big step, and you deserve someone in your corner who will walk with you through the process with honesty, expertise, and care. My goal is to be a resource, not a salesperson. Whether we work together now, later, or never, I want this guide to empower you to make confident, well-informed decisions.

Your Next Steps

The biggest mistake a home buyer can make is waiting until the last minute to prepare. Now that you have this playbook, here is what you should do next.

Your Action Plan

1. **Book Your Clarity Call:** Whether you are ready to buy next month or just have a few questions, let us connect and get to know each other. There is **no commitment, just clarity**. We will map out your specific timeline and goals.

2. **Get Connected with a Great Local Lender:** If you are curious about monthly payments, down payment assistance, or loan programs, I can connect you with **trusted, competitive lenders** who specialize in our region and WSHFC programs. Getting this in place early is essential.
3. **Join My Local Newsletter:** You will receive monthly updates on market shifts, new listings, local events, and home maintenance tips. It is designed to keep you **informed, supported, and connected**.
4. **Ask Me Anything Truly:** Whether it is about neighborhoods, financing, inspections, timing, or “Is this home a good investment?” **no question is too small or too big**. You can message me anytime.

I am looking forward to partnering with you on this exciting journey.