

ARMSTRONG FIELD GROUP

The North Shore Home Seller's Prep Handbook

Everything you need to do to prepare your home for sale, from the day you first think about selling to the day it goes live on the market.

Repairs and upgrades · Massachusetts requirements · Decluttering · Painting · Cleaning · Curb appeal · Staging · Photos and launch

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Welcome

The homes that sell fastest and for the strongest price are rarely the fanciest ones. They are the ones that were prepared on purpose: repaired, cleaned, priced, and presented so a buyer can picture living there from the first photo.

This handbook walks you through every step from the day you start thinking about selling to the day your home goes live on MLS PIN. It is written for homeowners on Boston's North Shore and throughout Essex County, and it covers the Massachusetts-specific requirements that out-of-state checklists miss.

How to Use This Handbook

- Read Phase 1 and Phase 2 first, even if your sale is a year away. They hold the items with the longest lead times.
- Work through Phases 3 to 8 in order. Repairs come before paint, paint before cleaning, cleaning before staging.
- Use the checklists as your working to-do list. Tick items off as you go.
- Call me before you spend money on any upgrade. A ten-minute conversation can save you thousands.

What's Inside

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— *Jim Armstrong, Broker and Group Leader, Armstrong Field Group | Aluxety Real Estate*

Phase 1: When You First Think About Selling

6 to 12 months out. The decisions you make in this phase shape everything that follows: your timing, your budget for preparation, and your bottom line.

Clarify Your Goals

- ☐ Why are you selling: more space, less space, relocation, retirement, an estate?
- ☐ Where are you going next, and do you need to sell before you buy?
- ☐ What is your ideal move date, and how flexible is it?
- ☐ What is the minimum you need to net to make the next step work?

Pick Your Timing

On the North Shore, activity traditionally builds from late winter into spring, when families want to move before the next school year. Summer stays active, and fall brings serious buyers with less competition. Winter listings face fewer buyers but also fewer competing homes. The right month for you depends on your next move, current inventory in your town, and how ready the house is. We will look at live market data together before choosing a date.

Get Your Financial Picture

- ☐ Request a mortgage payoff estimate (and any home equity line balance) from your lender.
- ☐ Ask me for a preliminary market analysis so you know your likely price range.
- ☐ Estimate your costs: brokerage commission (negotiable), your closing attorney, the Massachusetts deed excise tax (stamps), any repairs and prep costs, and moving.
- ☐ Talk with your CPA about capital gains. The primary-residence exclusion, the cost basis of improvements you have made, and timing can all affect what you keep.
- ☐ If you are buying next, get pre-approved now so you know your options.

Assemble Your Team

- **Listing agent.** Interview early. A good agent will walk the house with you months ahead and tell you what to fix and what to leave alone.
- **Real estate attorney.** In Massachusetts, sellers typically have their own attorney to review the Purchase and Sale Agreement and handle the deed. I am happy to share names.
- **Contractors.** Good painters, handymen, and electricians on the North Shore book out weeks or months in spring. Line them up now.
- **Stager, cleaners, and movers.** Book these once your list date is set.

Start Gathering Documents

- ☐ Your deed and the closing documents from your purchase
- ☐ Most recent tax bill and any betterment or abatement records

- ☐ Utility costs for the last 12 months (heating fuel, electric, water and sewer)
- ☐ Receipts and warranties for major work: roof, heating system, water heater, windows, kitchen, baths
- ☐ Building permits for past renovations
- ☐ Survey or plot plan, if you have one
- ☐ Condo owners: master deed, bylaws, rules, budget, and recent meeting minutes

Phase 2: Massachusetts Requirements to Handle Early

3 to 6 months out. Massachusetts has several seller requirements that can delay a closing if they surface late. Address them during preparation, not after you accept an offer.

Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Certificate

Under M.G.L. c. 148, §26F and §26F½, the local fire department must inspect your smoke and CO alarms and issue a Certificate of Compliance before the sale. You schedule and pay for this inspection; fees vary by town. The certificate is typically valid for a limited time (many departments use 60 days), so the inspection itself usually happens once you are under agreement.

What to do now:

- ☐ Walk the house and check the manufacture date on every smoke and CO alarm. Alarms over 10 years old, or with no date, must be replaced.
- ☐ New battery-powered smoke alarms must be photoelectric with a 10-year sealed, non-replaceable battery and a hush feature.
- ☐ Hard-wired alarms may need an electrician to replace.
- ☐ Call your local fire department for its checklist. Requirements depend on when the home was built or last permitted for work.

Title 5 Septic Inspection (Homes Not on Town Sewer)

If your home has a septic system, Title 5 (310 CMR 15.301) requires an inspection within two years before the sale, or three years if the system has been pumped annually with records. In winter, the inspection can be completed up to six months after the transfer if weather prevents it and the buyer is notified in writing. This applies to many homes in Ipswich, Essex, Topsfield, Boxford, Hamilton, Wenham, Rowley, parts of Gloucester, and other towns with limited sewer.

- ☐ Order your Title 5 early. A failed system can mean a repair costing tens of thousands of dollars, and you want time to plan for it.
- ☐ Gather pumping records.

Lead Paint (Homes Built Before 1978)

Federal law and Massachusetts law both apply. You must give buyers the federal lead disclosure and the Massachusetts Property Transfer Lead Paint Notification, disclose any lead information you know about, and share any lead inspection reports or letters of compliance you have. Buyers are entitled to a 10-day period to have a lead inspection done.

- ☐ Locate any lead inspection reports or letters of compliance from past owners.

Oil Heat

Massachusetts requires homes heated with oil to have an oil safety valve or a protective sleeve on the oil supply line. Many older systems were upgraded years ago; confirm yours.

- ☐ Ask your oil service company to confirm the safety valve or sleeved line, and get the paperwork.
- ☐ If there is a buried oil tank on the property, past or present, tell me now. Buyers, lenders, and insurers will ask.

Permits and Unpermitted Work

- ☐ Check with your town building department for open permits from past projects and get them closed out.
- ☐ Be prepared to discuss any work done without permits, such as finished basements, decks, or added bathrooms. These often surface in buyer inspections and appraisals.

Historic Districts and Flood Zones

- ☐ If you are in a local historic district (parts of Salem, Marblehead, Newburyport, and other communities), check with the historic district commission before exterior work such as painting colors, windows, doors, or fencing.
- ☐ Coastal homes: find your FEMA flood zone, any elevation certificate, and your flood insurance cost. Buyers will ask early.

Condominiums

- ☐ Your management company will need to provide a 6(d) certificate (M.G.L. c. 183A, §6(d)) confirming common charges are paid. Request it once under agreement and ask now about fees and turnaround.
- ☐ Ask about any planned special assessments, pending litigation, or master policy changes.

Disclosure

Massachusetts does not require a standard seller disclosure form for most sales, but you cannot misrepresent the property, and real estate licensees must disclose known material defects. Answer questions honestly. Your attorney can advise on anything you are unsure about.

This section is a general guide, not legal advice. Your closing attorney and local officials have the final word on requirements for your property.

Phase 3: Inspect, Repair, and Choose Upgrades Wisely

2 to 4 months out. Fix what a buyer's inspector will find, and be very selective about upgrades. Most sellers get a better return from repairs, paint, and cleaning than from renovations.

Consider a Pre-Listing Inspection

A home inspection before you list (typically a few hundred dollars) shows you what a buyer's inspector will see. You can fix items on your schedule and at your price, instead of negotiating them under deadline pressure. Ask about add-ons that matter here: radon testing, chimney inspection, and a sewer line camera scope for older homes.

Sort Every Item into Three Groups

Priority	Examples	Why It Matters
Fix before listing	Roof leaks, water in the basement, active plumbing leaks, electrical hazards, broken heating or cooling, rot, failed window seals that fog, missing handrails, broken steps	These scare buyers, show up on inspection, and can affect financing
Fix if budget allows	Dripping faucets, sticking doors and windows, loose hardware, torn screens, cracked outlet covers, burnt-out bulbs, worn caulk in tubs and showers, squeaky floors	Small items add up to an impression of neglect
Usually skip	Full kitchen or bath remodels, new additions, high-end appliances, swimming pools, niche personal upgrades	Rarely recover their cost before a sale, and they delay your listing

Upgrades That Usually Pay Off

- Fresh interior paint in neutral tones (Phase 5)
- Refinishing hardwood floors, or replacing worn, stained carpet
- Updated light fixtures and cabinet hardware
- New faucets, outlet covers, and switch plates
- A new front door or freshly painted door with updated hardware
- Landscaping cleanup and fresh mulch
- Garage door repair or replacement if it looks tired

Kitchens and baths sell homes, but a full remodel rarely makes sense right before a sale. A refresh often does: painted cabinets, new hardware, a new faucet, updated lighting, and regrouting.

Systems Buyers Ask About on the North Shore

- ☐ Heating system service record and age (oil, gas, or heat pump)
- ☐ Water heater age
- ☐ Roof age, and evidence of past ice dams on the ceilings below
- ☐ Basement moisture: dehumidifier, sump pump, and grading that directs water away from the foundation
- ☐ Chimney condition and the last cleaning date
- ☐ Electrical panel capacity and any knob-and-tube wiring in older homes
- ☐ Radon: testing is common in Essex County, and a mitigation system is a straightforward fix if levels are high
- ☐ Solar panels: whether owned or leased, and the transfer terms

Keep Your Receipts

Save invoices and warranties for everything you do. Buyers find them reassuring, and your CPA may treat some improvements as additions to your cost basis.

Phase 4: Declutter, Depersonalize, and Start Packing

6 to 10 weeks out. You are moving anyway, so start now. Less stuff makes rooms look bigger, closets look roomier, and photos look cleaner.

The goal: a buyer should notice the house, not your belongings. Aim to remove about a third of what is in each room.

Work Room by Room with Four Boxes

1. **Keep and use** until moving day
2. **Pack now** and store off-site, in the garage, or neatly in the basement
3. **Donate or sell**
4. **Discard or recycle**

Declutter Checklist

- ☐ Clear kitchen counters down to one or two items, such as a coffee maker and a bowl of fruit
- ☐ Empty about half of every closet so buyers see space, not stuff
- ☐ Clear the tops of dressers, nightstands, and bathroom vanities
- ☐ Remove extra furniture so traffic flows easily through each room
- ☐ Clear the refrigerator door of magnets, papers, and photos
- ☐ Organize the pantry, linen closet, and under-sink cabinets (buyers open them)
- ☐ Clean out the garage, attic, and basement so buyers can see the foundation, mechanicals, and storage space
- ☐ Reduce toys to one neat bin per child
- ☐ Store seasonal gear you will not use before the move

Depersonalize

- ☐ Pack most family photos, diplomas, and memorabilia
- ☐ Remove religious, political, and sports-team décor
- ☐ Store collections, trophies, and personal hobby items
- ☐ Put away anything with names on it

Secure Valuables and Private Items

- ☐ Lock up or remove jewelry, cash, prescription medications, firearms, and important papers
- ☐ Remove mail and bills from view

- ☐ Log out of computers and put away tablets

Pets

- ☐ Plan where pets will go during showings and open houses
- ☐ Clean or replace pet beds, store bowls and litter boxes out of sight, and treat any odors

Helpful North Shore resources: local donation centers, municipal bulk pickup programs, and junk removal services book up in spring. Ask me for current recommendations in your town.

Phase 5: Painting

4 to 6 weeks out. Fresh paint is one of the least expensive ways to make a home look cared for, brighter, and move-in ready. Paint after repairs and decluttering, before deep cleaning.

Interior

- Choose warm, light neutrals: soft whites, greiges, and pale grays. They photograph well and let buyers picture their own furniture.
- Repaint bold accent walls, children's room murals, and dark colors. Dark rooms photograph small.
- Use one consistent wall color through connected spaces to make the home feel larger.
- Ceilings: flat white. Fresh ceiling paint also hides old water stains, but fix the cause first and be honest if asked.
- Trim and doors: crisp semi-gloss white. Clean, bright trim makes a dramatic difference.
- Touch up scuffs in hallways, stairways, and around light switches.

Kitchen Cabinets

Dated wood or worn cabinets can often be professionally painted and fitted with new hardware for a fraction of the cost of replacement. White, soft gray, or a muted classic color works best.

Exterior

- ☐ Scrape and touch up peeling trim, window sashes, and railings
- ☐ Paint or stain the front door in a welcoming, classic color
- ☐ Refresh porch floors, steps, and shutters
- ☐ Pressure-wash siding, decks, and walkways (often a better first step than repainting)
- ☐ Check with your historic district commission first if your home is in a local historic district

Lead-Safe Painting in Older Homes

If your home was built before 1978, painted surfaces may contain lead. Any paint work that disturbs those surfaces should be done by a certified lead-safe renovator following lead-safe work practices (in Massachusetts, the Renovation, Repair and Painting program is administered by the Department of Labor Standards). Ask any painter for proof of certification.

Timing on the North Shore

Exterior paint needs dry weather and moderate temperatures. Plan exterior work for late spring through early fall, and book painters early: the best crews are busy by April.

Phase 6: Deep Cleaning

2 to 3 weeks out. A spotless home signals a well-maintained home. Buyers who see grime wonder what else has been neglected. For most sellers, a professional deep clean is money well spent.

Whole House

- ☐ Wash windows inside and out, including sills and tracks
- ☐ Dust ceiling fans, light fixtures, vents, baseboards, and the tops of door frames
- ☐ Wash walls and doors where scuffed (after painting has cured)
- ☐ Professionally clean carpets and rugs
- ☐ Clean or refinish hardwood floors; deep-clean tile and grout
- ☐ Replace HVAC filters
- ☐ Replace burnt-out bulbs, using one consistent color temperature (warm white) throughout

Kitchen

- ☐ Degrease the stove, range hood, and backsplash
- ☐ Clean inside the oven, microwave, refrigerator, and dishwasher
- ☐ Wipe cabinet fronts and clean inside drawers and cabinets
- ☐ Polish the sink and faucet; clear the drain and freshen the disposal

Bathrooms

- ☐ Scrub tile, grout, tubs, and showers; regrout or recaulk where stained
- ☐ Remove mineral buildup from faucets and showerheads
- ☐ Polish mirrors and glass shower doors
- ☐ Replace worn bath mats and shower curtains with fresh, neutral ones

Basement, Garage, and Mechanicals

- ☐ Sweep floors and remove cobwebs
- ☐ Wipe down the furnace or boiler, water heater, and electrical panel area
- ☐ Run a dehumidifier; a dry, fresh-smelling basement reassures buyers

Odors

You may not notice the smells of your own home, but buyers will. Common culprits are pets, cooking, smoke, and basement moisture. Clean the source rather than masking it. Avoid strong air fresheners and plug-ins; buyers often read them as a cover-up. Open windows when weather allows, and ask a trusted friend for an honest opinion.

Phase 7: Curb Appeal and Seasonal Prep

2 to 4 weeks out. The exterior is your listing's first photo and a buyer's first impression from the street. Many buyers drive by before deciding whether to book a showing.

Curb Appeal Checklist

- ☐ Mow, edge, and weed; trim shrubs away from windows and siding
- ☐ Lay fresh dark mulch in beds
- ☐ Add potted flowers or seasonal plants by the front door
- ☐ Clean or replace the doormat, mailbox, and house numbers
- ☐ Polish or replace the front door hardware and exterior light fixtures
- ☐ Clean gutters and make sure downspouts carry water away from the foundation
- ☐ Pressure-wash the walkway, driveway, deck, and patio
- ☐ Repair cracked steps, loose railings, and broken fence boards
- ☐ Stage outdoor spaces with a simple table and chairs, cleaned grill, and tidy cushions
- ☐ Remove trash cans, hoses, kids' toys, and yard clutter from view

North Shore by Season

Season	What to Focus On
Spring	Rake winter debris, repair plow damage to lawns and edges, check for ice-dam stains inside, and plant early color. This is peak listing season, so book vendors early.
Summer	Keep lawns watered and mowed weekly. Air conditioning should run smoothly for showings.
Fall	Rake leaves before photos, clean gutters, and use mums and simple autumn accents. Photograph before the leaves drop if you can.
Winter	Keep the driveway, walkways, and steps shoveled and treated for ice before every showing. Clear snow from the front of the house, and keep the home warm and well lit. If you have good warm-weather photos of the yard or gardens, share them with me; we can talk about whether and how to include them, clearly labeled by season.

Coastal Homes

Salt air in Marblehead, Swampscott, Gloucester, Rockport, Manchester-by-the-Sea, and Nahant is hard on paint, hardware, and windows. Wash salt film from windows and siding, replace corroded exterior fixtures, and make sure decks and railings are sound.

Phase 8: Staging

1 to 2 weeks out. Staging helps buyers understand how each room lives and helps your home stand out in online photos, where most buyers first see it. Staging is about presentation, not disguise.

Three Levels of Staging

Option	What It Involves	Best For
Self-staging	You rearrange and edit your own furniture and décor using this handbook	Homes that are already well furnished and decluttered
Consultation	A professional stager walks through and gives you a room-by-room plan; you do the work	Most occupied homes
Full staging	A stager brings in rented furniture, art, and accessories	Vacant homes, estate sales, and higher-end listings

Room-by-Room Staging Guide

- **Entry:** Clear and welcoming. A small table or bench, a mirror, a plant, and good lighting.
- **Living room:** Arrange furniture in a conversation group, pulled slightly away from the walls. Add a neutral throw and two or three pillows. Open curtains fully.
- **Kitchen:** Nearly clear counters. A bowl of lemons or green apples, a fresh dish towel, and nothing on the refrigerator.
- **Dining room:** Table cleared or set simply with a centerpiece. Remove extra leaves and chairs if the room feels tight.
- **Primary bedroom:** Make it calm and hotel-like. Crisp white or neutral bedding, matching nightstand lamps, nothing under the bed that shows.
- **Other bedrooms:** Give each a clear purpose: bedroom, office, or nursery. A room with no purpose reads as wasted space.
- **Bathrooms:** Fresh white towels, a new bar of soap or pump, a small plant. Toiletries out of sight, toilet lids down.
- **Home office:** Clear the desk except for a lamp and one or two neat items. Hide cords.
- **Basement and bonus rooms:** Show a use: playroom, gym, media room, or organized storage.
- **Outdoor spaces:** A seating area on the deck or patio helps buyers picture summer evenings.

Lighting

- Open every blind and curtain for photos and showings.
- Turn on every light, including lamps and under-cabinet lights.

- Make bulbs consistent in color and bright enough for each room.

Vacant Homes

Empty rooms photograph small and cold, and buyers struggle to judge scale. If your home will be vacant, ask me about full or partial staging, or virtual staging for photos, clearly labeled as such.

Phase 9: Photos, Pricing, and Listing Launch Prep

1 week out. Your online listing is your home's first showing. Everything you have done so far comes together in the photos, the price, and the description.

Pricing

We will review a full comparative market analysis together: recent sales, active competition, pending sales, and homes that did not sell. The right list price draws the most buyers in the first two weeks, when interest is highest. An overpriced home tends to sit, and a stale listing often sells for less than one priced well from the start.

Professional Photography, Video, and Floor Plans

- Professional photos, shot after staging and in good light
- Drone photography for larger lots, water views, and coastal properties, where appropriate
- A floor plan and, for many homes, a 3D or video tour

Photo-Day Checklist

- ☐ All lights on, all blinds open
- ☐ Counters, sinks, and tub ledges cleared
- ☐ Beds made tightly, pillows fluffed
- ☐ Toilet lids down, towels folded
- ☐ Cars out of the driveway, trash cans out of sight
- ☐ Pets and pet items out of the house
- ☐ Ceiling fans and TVs off

Information to Give Me for the Listing

- ☐ Utility costs, heating fuel type, and system ages
- ☐ Updates and improvements with dates
- ☐ What conveys with the house (appliances, window treatments, light fixtures, sheds) and what does not
- ☐ Features you love: the morning light, the walk to the beach, the commuter rail, the neighbors
- ☐ Best times for showings and any restrictions

Before Going Live

- ☐ Review and sign listing paperwork, including required Massachusetts disclosures
- ☐ Approve the listing description, photos, and price
- ☐ Decide on showing instructions, lockbox, and a first open house date

- ☐ Tell your neighbors; they often know someone who wants to move to the street
- ☐ Review the marketing plan: MLS PIN, the major home search sites, social media, email, and agent outreach

Phase 10: Final Days and Your Showing-Ready Routine

Once the house is ready, the job is keeping it that way. A simple daily routine makes last-minute showings far less stressful.

Final Walkthrough Before Going Live

- ☐ Walk the house as a buyer would, starting at the curb
- ☐ Test every light, faucet, toilet, and door lock
- ☐ Make sure the heat or air conditioning keeps the house comfortable
- ☐ Place a folder on the kitchen counter for me to stock with feature sheets and disclosures
- ☐ Plan where you, your kids, and your pets will go during showings and open houses

Ten-Minute Showing Checklist

1. Make beds and fold towels
2. Clear counters and put dishes in the dishwasher
3. Empty trash cans and take trash outside
4. Wipe bathroom sinks and mirrors; toilet lids down
5. Quick vacuum or sweep of high-traffic floors
6. Turn on all lights and open blinds
7. Set the thermostat to a comfortable temperature
8. Put away pet items, valuables, and medications
9. Clear the driveway and walkways (shovel and salt in winter)
10. Leave, and let buyers explore freely

Why You Should Leave During Showings

Buyers speak more openly, linger longer, and picture themselves in the home when the owner is not there. Doorbell and security cameras are common, but Massachusetts' wiretap law (M.G.L. c. 272, §99) prohibits secretly recording audio of conversations. Ask me before using any camera with audio during showings.

Keep the Feedback Loop Open

I will share showing feedback and online activity with you every week. If something is consistently coming up, we will address it quickly.

Master Timeline

The longest lead times come first, so start planning up to a year out. Every home is different: a well-maintained house can be ready in six to eight weeks, while a home with deferred repairs or an estate to clear may need longer.

When	Stage	Key Tasks
6–12 months out	Plan your sale	Goals, timing, finances, CPA questions, agent and attorney, documents
3–6 months out	Handle Massachusetts requirements	Smoke and CO alarm check, Title 5, lead paint records, oil line, open permits
2–4 months out	Inspect and repair	Pre-listing inspection, must-fix repairs, selective refresh upgrades
6–10 weeks out	Declutter and pack	Remove about a third of belongings, depersonalize, secure valuables
4–6 weeks out	Paint	Neutral interior walls, white trim, front door, exterior touch-ups
2–4 weeks out	Deep clean and curb appeal	Professional clean, odors, yard and mulch, gutters, walkways
1–2 weeks out	Stage, photograph, and price	Staging, photos and floor plan, pricing review, listing details
Launch	Go live on MLS PIN	Final walkthrough, ten-minute showing routine, first open house

Ready to start?

The best first step is a no-pressure walkthrough of your home. I will tell you what to fix, what to leave alone, and what your home is likely worth in today's North Shore market, so every dollar you spend on preparation works for you.

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Sources

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(mass.gov/info-details/preparing-your-home-for-a-smoke-and-co-alarm-inspection)

MassDEP: Buying or Selling Property with a Septic System (mass.gov/guides/buying-or-selling-property-with-a-septic-system)

Mass.gov: Homeowner Oil Heating System Upgrade and Insurance Law fact sheet

This handbook provides general information for Massachusetts home sellers and is not legal, tax, or financial advice. Requirements change; confirm details with your attorney, CPA, and local officials.