The Robbins Group

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A FREE GUIDE FROM THE ROBBINS GROUP

The San Diego First-Time Buyer Roadmap

How buying your first home actually works — what it really costs, and what to do now, even if "someday" is a year or two away.

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Important: *This guide is general information and is not lending, legal, or tax advice. Loan programs, rates, and down-payment requirements change and vary by lender and by your situation. Always confirm specifics with a licensed loan officer and, where relevant, a CPA. We're real estate professionals — we'll happily refer you to trusted lenders if you don't already have one.*

The first step isn't a house.

Most people think buying a home starts with browsing listings. It doesn't — and that's exactly why so many first-time buyers in San Diego end up frustrated, outbid, or heartbroken over a home they were never actually positioned to get.

The buyers who win here aren't the richest. They're the ones who understood the process before they needed it. This guide is the plain-English version of what we wish every first-timer knew before they started — the whole roadmap, what it really costs, and the small moves you can make right now, even if "someday" is a year or two away.

It won't make you an expert, and it won't pressure you into anything. There's no lender to call and no commitment attached to reading it. It'll just make sure that when you're ready, you're ready for real.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

The 7-step roadmap from "curious" to keys. What buying actually costs (hint: not 20% down). The monthly-payment picture. What to do with your credit and savings now. And what pre-approval really is — and isn't. Nothing here is a sales pitch.

The 7-Step Roadmap: From Curious to Keys

Every successful purchase follows roughly the same path. Knowing all seven steps up front is what keeps the process from feeling overwhelming — you'll always know where you are and what's next.

1. **Get financially ready.** Credit, savings, and debt — before you talk to anyone. Most of the work that decides your outcome happens here, quietly, months ahead.
2. **Understand your budget.** There's a difference between what a lender *will* loan you and what you should actually spend. Your comfortable monthly payment sets the real budget.
3. **Get pre-approved.** A lender verifies your numbers and tells you your true price range. It's a diagnostic, not a commitment (more on this later).
4. **Search with a clear filter.** Now you look at homes — with a real budget and a short list of must-haves versus nice-to-haves.
5. **Make an offer.** Price is only part of it; terms, timing, and how the offer is written are what make it win in San Diego.
6. **Inspections, appraisal & contingencies.** Your safety nets. This is where you confirm the home is what you think it is — and keep the right to walk away.
7. **Close & get the keys.** Final loan approval, signing, funding, and recording. Then it's yours.

WHERE YOU ARE TONIGHT

If you're reading this, you're at Step 0 — and that's exactly the right place to be. Everything here helps you nail Steps 1 through 3, which is where the whole thing is won or lost.

What It Actually Costs

THE #1 MISTAKE WE SEE FIRST-TIMERS MAKE

They fall in love with a house before they know their number — then either lose it to a stronger buyer or stretch into a payment that makes them miserable. Know your number **first**. The house comes after.

You probably don't need 20% down.

This is the myth that keeps more people renting than any other. Twenty percent down avoids mortgage insurance, but it is **not** required to buy. Common low-down-payment paths include:

- **Conventional loans** — as little as 3% down for many first-time buyers.
- **FHA loans** — 3.5% down with more flexible credit requirements.
- **VA loans** — 0% down for eligible veterans and service members.
- **USDA loans** — 0% down in qualifying areas.
- **Down-payment assistance** — California (through programs like CalHFA) and some local agencies offer first-time-buyer help. Availability and funding change, so ask a lender what you personally qualify for.

The other upfront costs

- **Closing costs** — typically ~2–5% of the price (lender fees, title, escrow, prepaids). In some deals the seller can help cover part of these.
- **Earnest money deposit** — a good-faith deposit (often ~1–3%) that's applied to your costs at closing, not an extra expense.
- **A small reserve** — lenders like to see a cushion left after closing, and you'll want one anyway.

The takeaway: the real cash-to-close number is far smaller than most renters assume — and a lender can give you your exact figure in one conversation.

The Monthly Picture & the San Diego Reality

The number that actually matters is the monthly payment.

Sticker price gets the attention, but your monthly payment is what you live with. It's made of four (sometimes five) parts, often called **PITI**:

- **Principal** — the part that pays down your loan.
- **Interest** — the cost of borrowing.
- **Taxes** — California property taxes, usually collected monthly.
- **Insurance** — homeowner's insurance, plus mortgage insurance if you put less than 20% down.
- **HOA** — if the home is a condo or in an association.

When you get pre-approved, ask your lender to show you the full monthly payment at a couple of different price points — not just the loan amount. That's the number to budget around.

> **A SAN DIEGO REALITY CHECK**
>
> Yes, San Diego is expensive. But real first-time buyers make it work here every week — with the right loan program, a realistic price band, and sometimes a condo or townhome as a first step onto the ladder rather than the dream house on day one. The goal is to **start**; equity and options grow from there.

We'll always give you the honest version of what your budget can and can't do in this market. No fantasy, no discouragement — just a real plan.

Credit & Savings: What to Do Now

This is the "you can start tonight" chapter. None of it requires talking to a lender or committing to anything — it just quietly improves your position for when you're ready.

Do these

- **Keep credit-card balances low** relative to your limits. One of the fastest ways to nudge a score up.
- **Pay every bill on time** — payment history matters most. Automate the minimums so nothing slips.
- **Automate savings** into a separate account so your down payment grows without willpower.
- **Keep steady income and employment** where you can — lenders like consistency.

Avoid these before you buy

- **Don't open or close credit accounts** right before or during the process — it moves your score and can spook the loan.
- **Don't make a large financed purchase** (a car, furniture on credit) — it changes your debt-to-income ratio.
- **Don't move big sums around** without a paper trail; lenders must source your funds.

OUR RULE OF THUMB

You don't need perfect credit. You need to know your number and a simple plan to nudge it up. A good lender will tell you the two or three specific moves that matter most for *your* file — often it's less than you'd think.

Pre-Approval, Demystified

This is the step first-timers fear most, usually because they think it's a commitment or a hit to their credit. It's neither. Clearing up what pre-approval actually is removes the biggest mental block to getting started.

What pre-approval is

- A lender reviewing your income, assets, and credit to confirm your **real budget**.
- The thing that makes your offer **credible** to sellers — in San Diego, offers without it usually don't get taken seriously.
- A diagnostic that tells you exactly what to fix if you're not quite there yet.

What pre-approval is NOT

- **Not a contract.** You're not obligated to buy anything, or to use that lender.
- **Not a commitment to a price.** You can buy below your approval — and usually should.
- **Not a credit disaster.** A mortgage inquiry has a small, temporary effect, and rate-shopping several lenders in a short window generally counts as one.

> **THE MINDSET THAT WINS**
>
> Pre-approval is what turns "someday" into "this year" — but only when **you're** ready. There's no penalty for getting your number early and sitting on it. A lot of our buyers get pre-approved months before they seriously look, just so they know where they stand.

What you'll typically need

Recent pay stubs, W-2s or tax returns, bank statements, and permission to pull credit. A good loan officer will hand you a simple checklist — you don't have to figure it out alone.

From Offer to Keys

Making an offer that wins in San Diego

In a competitive market, price is only part of what makes an offer stand out. Sellers also weigh:

- **Strength of your financing** — a solid pre-approval (or cash) reassures them you'll close.
- **Terms & timing** — matching the seller's preferred close date or a rent-back can beat a slightly higher price.
- **How the offer is written** — clean, complete, and credible wins more often than aggressive-but-messy.

This is where having an agent who negotiates in this county every week earns its keep — we help you win without overpaying or waiving protections you shouldn't.

Your safety nets: inspections, appraisal & contingencies

- **Inspection** — a professional checks the home's real condition; you can renegotiate or walk if something serious turns up.
- **Appraisal** — your lender confirms the home is worth what you're paying.
- **Contingencies** — the built-in exits (inspection, appraisal, loan) that protect your deposit while you verify everything.

Then: closing

Final loan approval, a walkthrough, signing, funding, and recording — and the keys are yours. Most purchases run roughly 30–45 days from accepted offer to closing, depending on your loan.

> **THE ONE TAKEAWAY**
>
> The first step isn't a house — it's knowing your number. Nail Steps 1 through 3 and everything after gets dramatically easier.

When you're ready, we're here.

We help San Diego first-time buyers go from "is this even possible?" to holding the keys — with zero pressure and no obligation. Want to talk through where you're at, or get connected with a trusted local lender? A 20-minute call costs nothing.

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