

Montgomery Co. sees falling home-sale prices, rising jobless rate

By Leah Fabel
Examiner Staff Writer

Montgomery County's existing-home sales price fell by nearly 8 percent in 2008, according to a County Council budget update Tuesday that contained a litany of bad news for county residents.

The report also showed that the unemployment rate rose by more than 1 percentage point last year. In December 2008, about 4 percent of the county was unemployed, or 19,000 people, compared with 12,000 people in December 2007.

In addition, job growth in the county has slowed dramatically. "There was basically no employment growth in 2008 over 2007," Office of County Council Staff Director Stephen Farber said, adding that the county saw a net gain of 420 jobs.

The combined effect of falling home sale prices, increased unemployment and no job growth will mean far fewer tax dollars in coming budgets for everything from schools to public safety, officials said.

"The decrease in capital gains is extraordinary," said Councilwoman Nancy Floreen, bemoaning the loss of tax revenue gained through such transactions as real estate sales. "Nothing in here is good news," she said.

The average price of a home fell by 8 percent to about \$507,000 in 2008, down from a 10-year high of about \$550,000 in 2007. Home sales declined by 21 percent in 2008, to more than 8,000, according to the county's Department of Finance.

Home sales in the county have been in decline since a high of almost 18,000 in 2004, but until 2008 average sale prices had been increasing.

The decline in home values translated into a round of residential property assessments that fell by more than 16 percent, according to the State Department of Assessments and Taxation. That will reduce property tax revenue for the county, though estimates won't be available until late February, Farber said.

Despite the dire revenue outlook, the council voted to expand its affordability guidelines for capital projects as it prepares the fiscal 2010 budget, essentially acting as though it will have \$330 million, not \$300 million, to work with on projects like school construction and road repairs.

Though County Executive Ike Leggett opposed the move, saying it "sends the wrong message in this fiscal climate," the majority on the council said it would allow its members budgetary flexibility in advance of the final plan to be voted on in the spring.

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EXAMINER EXCLUSIVE

Public defender stayed silent after client escaped

By Bill Myers
Examiner Staff Writer

A public defender kept quiet after his client, an alleged gunman in a near-fatal shooting, slipped from his custody and fled to avoid trial, *The Examiner* has learned.

Public Defender Chris Roberts agreed to take custody of his client, William Brice, so that Brice could attend the funeral of his father on April 18. Roberts promised Superior Court Judge Robert Richter that Roberts would call "the minute there was any trouble," according to a transcript obtained by *The Examiner*.

Brice was being jailed without bond. But once at the funeral, he slipped away. Brice has stayed on the run, and last week the U.S. Marshals Service put him on their most-wanted list.

Authorities discovered the



Brice

escape after the D.C. Jail declared Brice overdue. Roberts never alerted authorities that his client had fled. Instead, he faxed a letter to Richter's chambers, asking to be removed as Brice's lawyer.

Four days after Brice's escape, Richter confronted Roberts about his silence.

"Well, I mean, I do recall you agreeing to notify people, not your office, if there was a problem," Richter said, according to the transcript from April 22, 2008. "And not to then say, 'Well, I promised you I would notify him as a condition of release, but my office said my promise means nothing and to hell with you.'"

Roberts offered his "sincere apologies," but said that his own attorney had told him not to alert authorities to Brice's escape.

Richter let the matter drop after admonishing Roberts, the transcript shows.

Roberts' voice mail at the Public Defender Service says he is on leave until May. Service spokeswoman Julia Leighton did not respond Tuesday to requests for comment.

Legal experts say it is unusual for a defendant to be released on short-term furloughs while he or she is awaiting trial, but it's not unheard of. The city's bail laws are designed not to discriminate against the poor: The main question for a judge to answer is whether the defendant is a flight risk. As a result, most defendants in violent felonies are either locked up while they await trial or, occasionally, released on their own recognizance.

Brice was charged with a near-fatal shooting in Northeast that occurred Jan. 24, 2008. Authorities allege that Brice walked up to a crowd of people, pulled out a pistol and opened fire. A bullet struck one man and as he lay on the ground, and Brice shot him again, tucked the pistol away and ran away, court papers state.

He was scheduled to go on trial last June. Anyone with information on his whereabouts is asked to call the U.S. Marshals Fugitive Task Force at 301-489-1717.

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THE DISTRICT



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER FILE

The D.C. Council adopted a bill Tuesday that allows police to stop and warn any driver with accumulated snow or ice on their vehicle.

Council adopts softer version of ban on icy cars

By Michael Neibauer
Examiner Staff Writer

The D.C. Council on Tuesday pulled the teeth from an emergency bill requiring all vehicles to be cleared of snow and ice before getting on the road, striking the proposed \$50 fine in favor of a warning.

The legislation, adopted unanimously, authorizes D.C. police to stop and warn any driver who has failed to clear "accumulated" snow or ice from their car or truck. Flying ice and snow "can be catastrophic," said Ward 5 Councilman Harry Thomas Jr., who introduced the measure.

"We have people going out with their cars basically looking like Igloos," Thomas said.

The council amended the bill to eliminate the \$50 civil fine, for now. Most members said they backed the

intent, but warned against passing a fine-carrying law without a public hearing or much in the way of research. A warning, they said, at least starts the public education campaign.

"I do think this winter is a good time to get started making our roads safer," said Ward 4 Councilwoman Muriel Bowser.

At-large Councilman Phil Mendelson, who also urged more careful deliberation, said the bill minus the fine is less law and more "statement of policy."

Thomas said he would introduce permanent legislation, which could be in place by next winter if the council approved.

The legislation I have in mind would probably take us into balmy weather than we have now," said Ward 1 Councilman Jim Gra-

ham, who chairs the transportation committee, to which a permanent bill would likely be referred. A handful of states, including Pennsylvania and New Jersey, allow police to fine drivers if ice or snow detach from their vehicles and cause an accident or property damage. But no jurisdiction in the country requires all drivers to preemptively clear their vehicles or face penalties.

Trucking industry representatives have argued against bills such as Thomas' and another under consideration in New Jersey, because they claim truck drivers do not have the resources available to safely clear their vehicles of accumulated frozen precipitation.

Thomas' emergency measure will remain in effect for 90 days.

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THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW

Jacqueline Dupree

For six years, Jacqueline Dupree has been documenting the transformation of the Navy Yard area of Southeast D.C. on her Web site, www.JDLand.com. In September, the site won a 2008 Knight-Batten Award for citizen media.



When you started JDLand, what did the Southeast waterfront area look like?

Public housing. Taxi cab companies. Garages. Strip clubs. Asphalt plants. Abandoned buildings. Overgrown lots. And I have the pictures to prove it!

How did the opening of Nationals Park in April change the neighborhood?

First and foremost, it made most of the D.C. area aware that this neighborhood a mile from the U.S. Capitol, along the waterfront, actually existed. But the tremendous land rush that followed the decision to put the ballpark there is the obvious change — more than 150 buildings that were standing when I started taking photos have been demolished. It's mostly unrecognizable.

As the economy has soured, how have you seen the landscape change?

The physical landscape doesn't really look any different — it's not like there are incomplete skeletons of buildings standing abandoned. There are projects that were supposed to have gotten under way that are stalled, but someone just driving through wouldn't realize there was a slowdown.

How many construction cranes are up there at this point?

Not as many as there were in 2007! Only three of them right now.

What do you expect for D.C.'s development in 2009?

I'm certainly not expecting too many groundbreaking ceremonies this year. But so much has been built in such a short time — it's like when you have a growing child, and you buy their shoes a little too big so that they can grow into them. Right now the city needs to spend some time growing into what it's got.

What will mark the turning point for you when Southeast has fully redeveloped?

When people complain about what a zoo Half Street is on a Saturday night.

— Kytja Weir

Metro settles employee pants suit

Metro and the Justice Department settled a lawsuit Tuesday that accused the transit agency of religious discrimination for refusing to hire a woman whose religious faith dictated she couldn't wear pants.

Gloria Jones, who adheres to the Apostolic Pentecostal faith, had applied to be a bus driver, but the agency refused to hire her when she asked to wear a skirt instead of pants like other bus drivers, according to the suit filed in September.

In the agreement, Metro denied religious discrimination but agreed to provide mandatory training on religious discrimination and pay Jones \$47,324, which includes back pay with interest plus \$5,000 in compensatory damages. — Kytja Weir