A BUYER'S GUIDE

Buying a Home in South Jersey

The ultimate guide from first search to front door — readiness, pre-approval, searching and touring well, offers, and a closing without surprises.

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A Note Before We Start

Buying a home is exciting, expensive, and — for most people — unfamiliar enough to feel a little rigged. Strange vocabulary appears. Paperwork multiplies. Everyone else seems to know a step you missed. I want you to know at the outset: there is no secret handshake. There is a sequence, and once you can see the whole sequence, the stress drops by more than half.

This guide is that sequence, the way I walk it with my buyers across Burlington and Camden Counties — whether this is your first home or your fifth, whether you are moving across town or arriving from somewhere else entirely. We will talk about readiness without gatekeeping, money without myths, and offers without recklessness.

My philosophy in every purchase is the same as in every sale: **calm over chaos** — a clear plan, honest numbers, and no pressure. You should never feel rushed into the largest purchase of your life. You should feel prepared for it.

— Bob

1 The Map: The Whole Journey at a Glance

Before any detail, here is the entire road, so nothing later arrives as a surprise.

Get ready. You look honestly at your money, your credit, and your timeline — not to pass a test, but to know your real shape as a buyer.

Get pre-approved. A lender verifies your picture and puts your budget in writing, in monthly-payment terms you can actually live with.

Search. You define where and what, tune your alerts tightly, and learn to spot real value behind ordinary photos.

Tour. You walk homes like an evaluator, not a guest — systems and structure first, staging last.

Offer. You build an offer from evidence, with terms that protect you and a price you can defend.

Under contract. Attorneys review, inspectors inspect, an appraiser values, and title is searched — several professionals each checking one thing on your behalf.

Close. You walk through, sign, and the deed becomes yours.

Move in. Locks, shut-offs, paperwork, and the ordinary evenings that make it home.

Eight stages. None of them is mysterious, and each one is easier when the stage before it was done well. The rest of this guide takes them in order.

2 Are You Ready? What Ready Really Means

Readiness is not perfection. It is three honest pictures, clearly seen.

Your life picture. Buying makes the most sense when you expect to stay — in the area, and in roughly this shape of life — long enough for the home to be worth its buying costs. A home is not a liquid asset. If a move is likely soon, renting a while longer can be the smart play, and a good agent will tell you so.

Your stability picture. Lenders value steadiness: income they can document, work you are likely to keep, obligations you manage on time. You do not need an impressive life. You need a legible one. Big changes in the middle of a purchase — a new job in a new field, a large new debt, a financed car bought on impulse — make everything harder than it needs to be, so the calm season to buy is a steady season.

Your honesty picture. The most important question is not what a lender will allow. It is what payment lets you still live your life — save a little, handle a surprise repair, go to dinner without doing math. A home you can afford on paper but resent in practice is not a win. We shop to the payment you can carry comfortably, not to the ceiling someone else sets.

If those three pictures are reasonably clear, you are ready to prepare. If one of them is blurry, that is not a closed door. It is a short list: what to steady, what to save, what to wait out. Buyers who work the list become owners, usually sooner than they feared.

3 The Money Picture, Without the Myths

Four money ideas explain most of buying. None of them requires a finance degree, and all of them reward being learned before you fall for a house.

The down payment is a choice, not a toll. You will hear confident claims about what you must put down. Treat them as folklore until a lender shows you your own options in writing. Different loan paths ask for different amounts up front, and a smaller down payment is not a lesser purchase — it is a trade: less cash at the start, a different shape to the monthly payment that follows. The right answer depends on your reserves, your payment comfort, and how long you plan to stay. A good lender lays out the shapes side by side and lets the math, not the myth, decide.

The monthly payment is more than the mortgage. When people say "the payment," they usually mean a bundle: the amount borrowed paid back over time, the cost of borrowing it, property taxes, and homeowner's insurance — sometimes with mortgage insurance or a homeowners association charge added, depending on the loan and the property. In New Jersey, one part of that bundle deserves special

respect. **Property taxes here are a headline, not a footnote.** Two homes at the same price in two different South Jersey towns can carry meaningfully different tax bills, which means their true monthly costs can differ more than their prices suggest. Shop by full monthly payment, every time, and look at the tax line on every home you seriously consider.

The home you will live in daily — and the payment you will live with monthly. Both deserve the same clear-eyed look.

Closing costs are real and separate. Beyond the down payment, there are one-time costs to complete the purchase — lender charges, title work, attorney time, recording, and amounts prepaid for taxes and insurance. They are itemized before you commit, and they surprise only the buyers nobody warned. Ask your lender for an early estimate, keep it with your budget, and remember that who covers which cost can itself be part of a negotiation.

Credit is a story about habits. Your credit picture tells a lender how reliably you have handled obligations. Stronger credit generally earns more choices and better terms; weaker credit narrows the menu, but rarely ends the conversation. If your credit needs work, the repairs are unglamorous and effective: pay on time, every time, lower revolving balances where you can, and avoid opening new credit while you prepare. A lender can review your picture early and tell you plainly where you stand. That conversation costs you nothing but a little pride, and it replaces guessing with a plan.

A brief, honest survey of loan paths. Most buyers finance through one of a handful of broad families. **Conventional loans** are the general-purpose standard. **Government-backed paths** exist for particular buyers and properties — including the **VA Home Loan** for those who have served, and programs that help with the cash needed up front, covered in our companion guide to **Down Payment Assistance**. Other paths serve rural and suburban buyers, renovation purchases, and other specific situations. I name them here only so the words are familiar when your lender uses them. Which path fits you — its requirements, its costs, its paperwork — is a lender conversation, specific to your file, and the dedicated guides in this series go deeper on the ones above. What matters at this stage is simpler: there is almost

certainly a legitimate path shaped something like your situation, and finding it is your lender's job, not yours alone.

4 Pre-Approval: Your Budget With a Signature on It

If there is one step eager buyers most want to skip, it is this one. And if there is one step that protects them most, it is also this one — so we do it before the first serious tour.

Pre-qualification and pre-approval are not the same thing. A pre-qualification is a quick estimate: you describe your income and debts, a lender offers a rough sense of range. It is a conversation, and useful as one. A pre-approval is verified. The lender checks your credit, documents your income and assets, and states in writing what they are prepared to lend, subject to the home itself checking out. Sellers and their agents know the difference instantly. When offers compete, a verified pre-approval is what makes yours read as real.

Pre-approval does three jobs at once. It tells you your true range — in full monthly payment, taxes included, not in sticker price. It keeps you from falling in love outside that range. And it lets you move the day the right home appears, instead of beginning paperwork while another buyer writes the offer.

What you will gather. The paper trail of an ordinary financial life: proof of income, tax returns, bank statements, identification. Assemble it once, in one folder, physical or digital. Every later stage will ask for some of it again — underwriting loves an encore — and the buyers who sail are the ones who can produce a document in minutes instead of days.

Think of pre-approval as your budget with a signature on it. Shopping without one is browsing. Shopping with one is buying.

5 Choosing Where: Towns, Streets, and Daily Life

A home is not just a building. It is the daily life that building makes easy or hard. South Jersey rewards buyers who shop for the life first and the listing second.

Start with your anchors. Where do you work, who do you need to be near, what does an ordinary week actually require? Our corner of New Jersey holds several distinct ways of living within a short drive of each other. The **river towns** along the Delaware — places like Riverton, Palmyra, Riverside, Delanco, and Burlington — offer older, character-rich streets, porches and sidewalks, and for many residents a genuine connection to Philadelphia by bridge or by the River LINE light rail. The **established suburbs** — Moorestown and Mount Laurel among them — offer the classic pattern of neighborhoods, yards, and everyday conveniences gathered close. Around and between them sit boroughs and townships that each have their own center, their own pace, and their own housing stock, from twins and rowhomes to ranches and colonials of every era.

The river towns: porches, sidewalks, mature trees — and a street that ends at the water.

I am not going to rank them for you, because the ranking depends on your life, and because any data I printed here about commutes, prices, or popularity would age faster than this guide. Instead, do the fieldwork that never goes stale:

- **Drive the commute** at the hour you would actually drive it, not on a quiet Sunday.
- **Visit at different hours.** A street has a morning personality, an evening personality, and a weekend personality. Meet all three before you marry one.
- **Walk the blocks around a home you like.** Sidewalks, upkeep, noise, light — the things no listing photo can settle.
- **Price the whole life.** A slightly less expensive home with a much heavier tax bill, a far longer drive, or a second car required may not be less expensive at all.

The right town is the one where your ordinary Tuesday works. Find that, and the right house inside it gets much easier to recognize.

6 Searching Well: Signal Over Scroll

Most buyers now meet homes as a feed. Feeds are built to keep you scrolling, not to help you decide. Searching well means reversing that: less volume, better signal.

Tune your alerts tightly. Set your search to your real towns, your real payment range, and your non-negotiables — and let it be narrow. A tight alert that surfaces a few true candidates serves you better than a loose one that buries them under maybes. When a home that fits appears, you will know quickly, and speed matters most exactly then.

Learn to read past the presentation. Some of the best value in South Jersey hides behind ordinary photography: a solid ranch photographed on a grey day, a well-built colonial whose owner never learned the word staging. Learn to separate the house from its photos. Look for the things that cannot be faked in either direction — layout, light, lot, location, the age and condition of the big systems as disclosed — and let paint, furniture, and decor fall to the bottom of your attention, where they belong. Cosmetic flaws are usually the cheapest flaws a house can have.

Do the drive-by. Before a tour, drive past. Check the street, the neighbors' upkeep, the parking, the feel. Many homes eliminate themselves kindly at the curb, and a few quiet favorites announce themselves there too.

Keep a short list and a memory. Score each serious candidate against your written needs and wants while the visit is fresh, in the driveway if you can. Buyers who keep notes decide cleanly. Buyers who rely on memory tour in circles.

And hold this through the whole search: your first home — or your next home — does not have to be your perfect home. It has to be a good home, at a payment you can carry, in a place where your life works. Good compounds. Perfect is usually just expensive waiting.

7 Touring Like an Evaluator

A tour is not a visit. You are not a guest admiring someone's home; you are an evaluator deciding whether this structure deserves your money. Kind, respectful — and clear-eyed.

Start with what is expensive to change. Layout and location cannot be renovated. Systems nearly as stubborn: the roof, heating and cooling, plumbing, electrical, the foundation and structure. Stand in the basement. Look at the age and condition of the furnace and water heater. Look for water where water should never be — stains, musty smells, fresh paint in suspicious places. Check how floors feel underfoot and whether doors hang true. These are the bones, and bones are what your money is really buying.

Then look at what is cheap to change. Paint, hardware, light fixtures, landscaping that has had a hard season, a kitchen that is dated but sound. These are weekends and modest projects, not verdicts. The classic touring error runs in both directions: rejecting a strong house for ugly carpet, and falling for a weak

house wearing beautiful staging. Staging is designed to make you feel. Let it — after the bones have passed.

Ask the practical questions out loud. What stays with the home and what goes? What do the current owners know about the systems, the roof, recent work? What are the taxes as they stand, and what does the homeowners association charge, if there is one, and cover? Your agent can get answers in writing where it matters.

Take your own photos and notes. Listing photos are the seller's story. Yours are your memory. Photograph the furnace label, the panel, the basement corners — the unglamorous evidence you will want at offer time and inspection time.

Tour enough homes to calibrate, and trust the calibration when it comes. Evaluators do not fall in love. They recognize fit — and then they act on it promptly, which is the next stage.

8 Making an Offer That Can Close

An offer is not a bid shouted at an auction. It is a written proposal — price plus terms — that a seller must be able to imagine actually closing. Build it that way.

Price it from evidence. Your agent will price your offer from comparable sales: what similar homes nearby have actually sold for, adjusted honestly for this home's condition, updates, and location. Not from the asking price, which is a strategy the seller chose. Not from a website's estimate, which has never been inside the house. An evidence-based price is defensible — to the seller now, and to an appraiser later.

Understand the whole bundle. Price is the headline, but sellers read the whole document:

- **Earnest money** — your good-faith deposit, held in escrow, showing the seller you are serious. It becomes part of your funds at closing, and your contract governs what protects it.
- **Contingencies** — the protections that let you step back if a defined check fails: inspection, appraisal, financing. Each one protects you, and each one also asks the seller to carry a little more uncertainty. Keeping, shaping, or waiving any of them is a decision to make slowly, with your agent and attorney, eyes open about both sides of the trade.
- **Financing strength** — your pre-approval, your down payment, the cleanliness of your file. Sellers favor buyers who look certain to be funded.
- **Timing** — your proposed closing date and any flexibility around the seller's own move. Sometimes a date that fits the seller's life is worth more than a small difference in price.

In a competitive moment, stay principled. Multiple offers happen. When they do, the disciplined moves are these: know your ceiling before the deadline, not during it; lead with your cleanest terms rather than

your most complicated ones; and let your agent present your file's strength plainly. You may hear about **escalation clauses** — language that raises your price automatically above competing offers up to a cap you set. They exist, they are used, and they carry real complexity and real risk if drafted casually. If one is ever considered for your offer, it should be considered generally, cautiously, and with your attorney's input before anyone signs — never as a reflex.

And if you lose a house? It stings, and then it instructs. Every lost offer sharpens your pricing, your terms, and your speed for the next one. The buyers who close are usually not the ones who won the first house. They are the ones who stayed ready.

The door you are really negotiating for — on terms that protect you all the way to it.

9 Under Contract I: Attorney Review, Inspection, and Appraisal

Your offer is accepted and signatures are down. In New Jersey, the deal now passes through three checks, each with its own professional and its own purpose. Knowing them in advance turns a tense stretch into a procedural one.

Attorney review. New Jersey handles this stage distinctively. After buyer and seller sign the standard contract, there is a short window during which each side's attorney can review the contract, disapprove it, and negotiate changes before it becomes final. This is normal, expected, and — importantly — a protection built for you, not a sign that anything is wrong. During review, your attorney adjusts terms to your situation and adds protections the standard form does not cover. Until review concludes, hold your excitement at a simmer and do not schedule movers. When the attorneys conclude review, the contract is final, and the real deadlines begin to run. This guide describes the process generally, as education; your attorney advises you on your contract, and their word governs.

The home inspection. You hire an inspector who works only for you. Over a few hours they examine the structure, roof, plumbing, electrical, heating and cooling, and the places water likes to hide. The written

report that follows will list everything from the trivial to the significant — nearly every home, including lovely ones, produces a list. The inspection is not a pass-or-fail exam and it is not a tour of everything that could ever age. It is information with price tags attached. Armed with it, you and your agent and attorney decide what to request — repairs, a credit, acceptance as it stands — and how to ask in a way that fixes problems without poisoning a good deal. If something major and truly unexpected surfaces and cannot be resolved fairly, your contract's protections are the conversation, guided by your attorney.

The appraisal. Your lender orders an independent valuation to confirm the home supports the loan, because the home secures the loan. If the value comes in at or above your price, everyone exhales. If it comes in low, there are general paths, and your team will walk them with you: ask the lender to reconsider with better comparable evidence, renegotiate the price with the seller, bridge some of the difference with your own funds if you have them and choose to, or step back where your contract protects you. What there is not, ever, is any approach that involves misleading the lender or the appraiser. A low appraisal is a problem to solve in daylight, and most of them do get solved.

10 Under Contract II: The Quiet Weeks to Closing

Between the checks and the closing table comes the stretch buyers describe as strangely quiet. It is not quiet. It is your loan being built, in a room you cannot see.

Underwriting. The lender verifies everything — income, assets, employment, the property, the paperwork — and will ask for more documents, sometimes documents you have already provided. This is the process working, not a warning about you. Your jobs are simple and absolute: respond quickly and completely, keep your finances boring, and change nothing material without telling your lender first. No new debts, no large unexplained deposits, no job changes you can avoid. Boring is beautiful in underwriting.

Title. A title search confirms the seller can actually convey the home — that the deed is clean, free of surprise liens and claims — and title insurance is arranged to protect you going forward. Invisible when it goes right, which is nearly always, and essential when it does not.

Insurance and the final details. You will arrange homeowner's insurance to be in place for closing, and your lender will confirm it. Near the end you will receive your closing disclosure laying out the final figures of your loan and costs. Read it. Compare it to the estimate you were given early. Ask about anything that moved. This is exactly what the document is for.

The final walkthrough. Just before closing, you walk the home once more: it should be in the agreed condition, agreed repairs completed, items that convey in place, nothing new broken or missing. Walkthrough problems are uncommon, and they are far easier to resolve before signatures than after — so look carefully, run the water, flip the switches, and speak up on the spot.

Closing day. You will sign the stack — often at a title office or your attorney's office — bring identification and the funds your closing disclosure specifies, in the form it specifies, and receive your keys. The deed records. The home is yours. Feel free to stand in the empty living room for a minute before the boxes come in. Everyone does.

11 After the Keys: The First Week as an Owner

The deeper guides in this series will take you further into ownership. For the flagship, here is the first week, at a glance — the moves new owners are glad someone mentioned early.

Change the locks. You do not know who holds a key to your home — prior owners, their relatives, a neighbor, a contractor from years ago. Now you will know: you do.

Learn your shut-offs on a calm day. The main water shut-off, the breaker panel, and the gas shut-off if your home uses gas. Find them while nothing is leaking, label them, and make sure everyone in the house knows.

Move your paperwork into one home. Closing documents, your inspection report, warranties, manuals. One folder, physical or digital, that future-you can find during a repair at the least convenient hour imaginable.

Start the small rhythm. Filters, gutters, seasonal checks, the unglamorous schedule that keeps small maintenance from becoming large repair. A home rarely fails all at once. It is maintained, or it is not, in small regular acts.

Make the updates. Address changes for license, registration, mail, accounts and utilities, if any are not already handled — and anything your attorney flagged for your town or county.

Then live in it. Something ordinary will happen — a quiet morning, a familiar light in the kitchen — and the whole long process will condense into a single calm fact: this is home.

> A good purchase is not the one where you won every argument. It is the one where every step was understood, every number was honest, and the deal that signed is the deal that closed.

12 The Buyer's Road Map Checklist

Get Ready

- ☐ See your three pictures clearly: life, stability, and the payment you can carry comfortably

- ☐ Review your credit and begin the simple, steady fixes if it needs work
- ☐ Save toward the down payment and closing costs — both are real
- ☐ Ask lenders plainly which loan paths fit a buyer shaped like you

Get Pre-Approved and Build Your Team

- ☐ Gather income proof, tax returns, and bank statements in one folder
- ☐ Obtain a verified pre-approval — not only a pre-qualification
- ☐ Choose your REALTOR® and get how everyone is paid in plain language
- ☐ Line up a local real estate attorney and an inspector you can call when a home hits

Search and Tour

- ☐ Choose towns by your ordinary week: anchors, commute, life at different hours
- ☐ Tune alerts tightly to your real range, towns, and non-negotiables
- ☐ Drive by serious candidates before touring them
- ☐ Tour like an evaluator: bones and systems first, staging last
- ☐ Score each home against your written list while the visit is fresh

Offer and Under Contract

- ☐ Price the offer from comparable sales, with terms that tell a strong, clean story
- ☐ Know your ceiling before any deadline, and decide contingency questions with counsel
- ☐ Let attorney review do its work before treating the contract as final
- ☐ Attend your inspection, read the report fully, and negotiate requests calmly
- ☐ Respond to lender requests quickly and keep your finances boring

Close and Move In

- ☐ Read your closing disclosure against your early estimate and ask about changes
- ☐ Do a careful final walkthrough and speak up on the spot
- ☐ Bring identification and funds exactly as your closing disclosure specifies
- ☐ Change the locks, learn the shut-offs, and file your documents in one place

The roadmap is an order of operations, not a stopwatch. Homes appear on their schedule, not ours. What you control is being ready — financially, practically, and calmly — for the moment the right one does.

A Final Word

Buying well is not about tricks, timing the market like a trader, or out-shouting other buyers. It is about a clear picture of your own life and money, a team that explains instead of sells, evidence behind every price, and steady handling of the checks between contract and keys. Do those things in that order, and buying stops feeling like a gamble and starts feeling like what it should be: a plan, executing, toward a front door that is yours.

If you are thinking about buying anywhere in Burlington or Camden County — soon, or simply someday — the right first step is the same: a conversation and a real set of numbers. What you can carry comfortably, what that buys in the towns where your life works, and what the road from here to keys actually looks like for you. From there, the plan writes itself, and you can walk it on your own timeline.

Ready when you are

Search Homes · robertmillaway.com

Book a Call · robertmillaway.com

What's My Home Worth? · robertmillaway.com/home-value

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