Your First-Time Home Buyer Guide to Milwaukee Metro

Making smart, informed decisions in Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Washington and Waukesha counties.

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REALTOR® · ABR® · PSA

Market data current to August 2026

Schedule a consultation

Visit my website

You're not alone in this journey

First-time buyers across Southeast Wisconsin share the same handful of worries.

"Am I making a mistake?"

Education and preparation dramatically reduce buyer's remorse.

"Rates are high, should I wait?"

Waiting often means watching prices rise faster than rates fall. You can refinance later.

"How much cash do I need?"

Programs exist offering 3% down, 0% down through VA and USDA, and assistance toward closing.

"What if something breaks?"

Home warranties, inspections and a maintenance reserve protect you.

"What if I overpay?"

Professional appraisals and agent guidance keep you at fair market value.

Milwaukee Metro remains one of the most affordable and opportunity-rich markets for first-time buyers in the Midwest.

Renting vs. owning

Homeownership builds wealth through three mechanisms that renting cannot match.

Equity

After five years you typically own 15–20% of the home's value through principal payoff alone. In the early years most of each payment is still interest, so this builds slowly at first and accelerates.

Appreciation

Milwaukee County values rose **4.8%** year over year to August 2026, and Washington County **6.9%**. Waukesha and Ozaukee were flatter over the same period.

Stability

A fixed-rate mortgage locks your housing cost for 30 years. Rent rises 3–4% a year.

If you plan to stay in Southeast Wisconsin three years or more, buying builds your wealth while renting builds your landlord's.

Run your own rent-versus-buy comparison with the calculators on my website — the answer depends on your rate, your down payment and how long you plan to stay.

Understanding your buying power

Affordability is not just about qualifying. It is about keeping the payment comfortable while you still save and live.

Front-end DTI — housing costs only, divided by gross income.
Back-end DTI — all debts divided by gross income.

Lenders count mortgage, taxes, insurance, HOA, car loans, student loans and credit cards.
They don't count utilities, groceries, gas or entertainment — but you should still budget for them.

An example. Earning $75,000 a year, lenders allow up to about $2,688 a month for all debts at a 43% back-end ratio. With $500 a month in car and student loans, that leaves roughly $2,188 for housing.

Loan type	Front-end	Back-end	Min credit
Conventional	28%	43%	620
FHA	31%	43%	580
VA	None	41%	None
USDA	29%	41%	640
WHEDA	31%	45%	620–640

The market, August 2026

County	Median	Days on mkt	Sale-to-list	Supply
Milwaukee	$325,000	7	101.5%	1.9 mo
Waukesha	$525,000	5	102.1%	2.15 mo
Ozaukee	$525,000	5	101.8%	1.7 mo
Washington	$481,000	9	101.1%	2.1 mo

Year over year: Milwaukee **+4.8%**, Washington **+6.9%**, Ozaukee **+2.4%**, Waukesha **–4.5%**.

Every county is selling above asking and inside two weeks. Inventory has loosened — Milwaukee is up 22% and Waukesha 11.9% year over year — so there is more to choose from than a year ago, but you still need to move decisively.

Source: RapidStats, August 2026.

How much cash do you really need?

The biggest myth is that you need 20% down. Most first-time buyers put down 3–5%, and some programs require nothing.

Against the August 2026 county medians, the down payment alone works out to:

County	Median	3% down	5% down
Milwaukee	$325,000	$9,750	$16,250
Waukesha	$525,000	$15,750	$26,250
Ozaukee	$525,000	$15,750	$26,250
Washington	$481,000	$14,430	$24,050

Closing costs typically add another 2–4% of the price on top. Buying below the county median — which most first-time buyers do — brings all of these numbers down.

Milwaukee County offers the lowest barrier to entry, and assistance programs can reduce the cash needed further.

Choosing the right mortgage

Program	Down	Credit	Best for
Conventional	3–20%	620+	Strong credit, stable income
FHA	3.5%	580+	Lower credit scores
VA	0%	None	Veterans, active military
USDA	0%	640+	Rural and suburban
WHEDA	0–3.5%	620–640	Wisconsin first-time buyers

- **Conventional**

  Low rates, and PMI comes off at 20% equity.

- **FHA**

  Easier approval with a low down payment.

- **VA**

  No down payment, no PMI, competitive rates.

- **USDA**

  No down payment, but property location restrictions apply.

- **WHEDA**

  Low rates and down payment assistance; pre-purchase education required.

Down payment assistance

Assistance programs provide grants or low-interest loans toward your down payment and closing costs. **Availability and terms change through the year — confirm current status before counting on any of them.**

WHEDA Capital Access DPA

0% interest with no monthly payments. Limited allocation, first-come first-served.

WHEDA Easy Close DPA

Up to 6% of purchase price as a 10-year fixed second mortgage. Widely available.

Milwaukee City DPA

On City of Milwaukee properties, income limits apply.

Waukesha County DPA

Varies by program, with county-specific requirements.

West Allis Home Buyer Loan

Toward down payment and closing costs, on a single-family home or duplex in West Allis.

The home buying process

25 to 45 days from offer to closing.

Consultation

Pre-Approval

House Hunting

Offer

Earnest Money

Each stage has a defined timeline. Pre-approval through closing typically spans 25 to 45 days once you are under contract — knowing what comes next keeps you confident and prepared at every step.

Contingencies explained

Contingencies are conditions that must be met for the sale to proceed. They protect you from losing earnest money or being forced to complete a purchase when problems surface.

Inspection

Inspect and negotiate repairs or credits, typically within 10–14 days. Request repairs, credits, a price reduction, or walk away.

Financing

Protects you if loan approval falls through, typically within 30–45 days. If denied, you cancel and your earnest money is refunded.

Appraisal

Protects you if the home appraises below the purchase price. The seller reduces, you bring cash, you meet in the middle, or you walk.

Right to cure

Wisconsin law gives sellers reasonable time to fix defects found at inspection before a buyer can cancel.

⚠ Never waive a contingency unless you understand the risk you're taking on.

Where first-time buyers are buying

Medians below are August 2026.

Milwaukee County

City of Milwaukee — **$252,000**. Best value inside the city; strong house-hacking options in Riverwest and the near north and south sides.
West Allis — **$315,500**, up 13.3% year over year. Exploding popularity, ideal for FHA and WHEDA.

Waukesha County

City of Waukesha — **$420,000**. Downtown revitalisation, walkable, the lowest entry in the county.
New Berlin — **$451,500**. Family-friendly with good schools.
Muskego — **$635,000**. Lake access and small-town character, but no longer an entry-level market.

Washington County

West Bend — **$445,000**, up 28.6%. The county seat, and rising fast.
Germantown — **$477,500**. Excellent schools, new construction, easy Milwaukee commute.
Hartford — **$485,000**, up 24.4%.

Ozaukee County

Port Washington — **$437,500**. Lake Michigan access and a charming downtown.
Grafton — **$466,500**. Growing downtown, good schools.
Cedarburg — **$513,501**. Historic and highly competitive.

Inspection and negotiation know-how

Issue	Lifespan	Cost	Urgency
Roof	20–25 yrs	$8K–$15K	High
Furnace	15–20 yrs	$3.5K–$6K	High
AC	12–15 yrs	$3K–$5.5K	Medium
Water heater	10–12 yrs	$1K–$2K	Medium
Electrical	40+ yrs	$2K–$8K	High
Sewer lateral	50–100 yrs	$3K–$10K	High
Foundation	Varies	$2K–$15K+	High
Water intrusion	Ongoing	$1K–$10K	High

Southeast Wisconsin specifics — older homes carry outdated electrical, plumbing and insulation. Basement water intrusion is common in our clay soil. Roofs need checking for ice dam damage. Clay and cast-iron sewer laterals are prone to tree root intrusion.

Your four options: request repairs, request credits, request a price reduction, or walk away within the contingency period.

Budget $400–$600 for a general inspection and $150–$300 for a sewer scope. Expect to find issues in older homes. That is normal.

Budget beyond the purchase

Your mortgage payment is one part of the cost.

What lenders count

Principal and interest, property taxes (about 1.34% annually), homeowners insurance (about 0.35%), PMI if under 20% down, and HOA fees.

What you actually pay

All of that, plus utilities at $150–$300 a month and a maintenance reserve of 1–2% of home value annually. On a $325,000 home that reserve is $3,250 to $6,500 a year.

Lenders qualify you on the first list. You live on the second. Budget for the all-in cost and you avoid the financial stress that catches new owners out in year one.

Your actual monthly payment depends on your rate, down payment and credit. Run the numbers with the calculators on my website, or we'll do it together on a consultation.

The psychology of a first purchase

01

Anticipation

Optimism and eagerness. Risk: overestimating budget. Get pre-approved early and judge each home by its estimated monthly payment, not its price.

02

Overwhelm

Too many options, analysis paralysis. Risk: missing opportunities. Build a must-have versus nice-to-have list.

03

Confidence

Clarity on priorities, ready to offer. Risk: overconfidence. Stick to your budget guardrails.

04

Negotiation stress

Anxiety through inspection and appraisal. Risk: walking away over minor issues. Lean on your agent.

05

Closing

Relief and pride. Risk: rushing the documents. Review everything carefully.

Must-haves

Location and commute, bedrooms and bathrooms, budget, genuine deal-breakers.

Nice-to-haves

Updated kitchen and baths, finished basement, large yard, a specific style.

Myth vs. reality

"I need 20% down." Most first-time buyers put down 3–5%. VA and USDA offer 0%.	**"I need perfect credit."** FHA accepts 580+. Conventional accepts 620+.
"Rates are too high to buy." You can refinance when rates drop. Waiting often means paying a higher price.	**"I'll find the perfect home."** Every home has tradeoffs. Focus on must-haves and long-term value.
"The inspection will find everything." Inspectors aren't psychic. Budget for surprises in years one and two.	**"I can't afford maintenance."** Budget 1–2% of home value annually. Most issues are manageable.

Buying together

Budget together

Agree on a maximum monthly payment before you start looking. Discuss long-term goals and be honest about risk tolerance.

Create shared must-haves

Both partners agree the non-negotiables. Assign roles — one leads on finances, one on aesthetics — and establish veto rules.

Balance priorities

Location versus size, condition versus price, neighbourhood versus budget. Expect to compromise.

Under 3 years

Renting likely makes more sense, since closing costs eat into equity.

3 to 5 years

The break-even zone.

5 years or more

Buying almost always wins financially.

Your team

Lender

Ethan Brooks, Refined Mortgage Group / Fairway Independent Mortgage.
414-488-0438 · ethan@trustrefined.com

Home inspection

Tri County Inspection & Environmental, LLC.
(262) 716-8364 · hello@wisconsininspection.com

Insurance

Leticia Guzman, American Family Insurance.
(262) 542-9695 · lguzman@amfam.com

Contractors

Ask me, and I'll match the trade to the job.

You are never required to use any of them.

Your next steps

01

Schedule your buyer consultation

Budget, timeline, neighbourhoods, and a personalised plan.

02

Get pre-approved

1 to 3 days. You come away with a letter stating your buying power.

03

Complete homebuyer education

Optional, but required for WHEDA. Six to eight hours online.

04

Start house hunting

Tours, open houses, off-market opportunities. Two to eight weeks.

05

Make an offer

Same day, once you find the right home.

Schedule a consultation

Visit my website

Ready to start?

> "Buying your first home doesn't have to be overwhelming when you have the right guide. I'll show you exactly what you can afford, what programs you qualify for, and which neighbourhoods give you the best value. Let's get started."

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Schedule a consultation

Visit my website

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Market figures are RapidStats, August 2026, and move monthly — ask me for a current read before relying on them. Program terms and assistance availability change through the year. Brokered by eXp Realty · Equal Housing Opportunity.