

lynchburg area

Short supply, high demand hit Lynchburg-area housing market

Rachael Smith
Feb 19, 2022

Recently, a tri-level home on Grove Road near Wards Ferry Road was listed for \$189,000 on a Friday.

By Monday morning, the owner had 24 offers in hand.

“For Lynchburg, this is absolutely unheard of,” said Karl Miller, of Karl Miller Realty.

One prospective buyer’s offer was accepted — and that means there still are 23 disappointed buyers left still looking for a home.

“So the next one’s going to come up, and those buyers are either going to get a little bit more motivated to make a stronger offer next time, or some of them are going to get discouraged and then just decide to rent and sign another year on their lease,” Miller said. “But the fact of the matter is, that buyer is still a buyer and there still [is] an internal desire to be a homeowner, and even if they kick the can down the road, they are eventually going to get back into the market again.”

According to Miller, the median sales price for single-family homes in the greater Lynchburg area increased by more than 20% during the past two years, and the median number of days for a house to stay on the market was only five.

“That is insane,” he said.

According to Wanda Ott, president of the Lynchburg Realtors Association, in 2019 there were about 3,000 single-family homes sold at an average of \$217,000.

In 2020, the average sale price rose to \$234,000 — an increase of 8.5%. In 2021, 3,700 homes in the region were sold at an average of \$264,000 — an increase of 13% from the year before.

“We still sold more houses,” she said. “The problem is we still have more buyers than we have to supply for, but we’re still selling a lot of houses. If I sold somebody a house back in 2016 and they paid \$175,000, it’s likely they could make almost a profit of close to \$100,000. And I’ve seen that happen with several of my clients.”

Still, both Miller and Ott caution buyers to not get in over their heads.

“Don’t overpay for something just to get something,” Ott said. “But there are some people out there that feel desperate, but I’ve been in it long enough to see that it will settle down and things will level out.”

Like many potential home buyers, Nouzar Moniriarani and his fiancée, Grace, were looking for something under \$350,000 and saw well over 60 homes from the end of the summer last year until the fall when they signed a contract for a new home.

Monirarani's advice to other home buyers: Don't stress out if you don't immediately get the house you want.

"If you don't get it, it will make you want to do something crazy next time, like pay way over in price," he said. "People are charging crazy amounts of money for some of these houses and you don't have to jump on something that you don't like just because it's available."

It's a seller's market and that's no secret, Miller said.

The reason some of these houses are selling \$30,000 above the list price is because buyers don't want to risk losing them.

"It's just a matter of who's the most motivated buyer right now," he said. "When you're buying a home, it's one of the most expensive, you know, financial decisions that most Americans make. You have to be in a location you like, you have to be comfortable with the style and condition of the house and it has to be the right price."

In 2019, it was taking about 60 days to sell a single-family house, he said.

So why is this happening?

"We have an inventory shortage, which actually means we have less houses and we have tons and tons of buyers," Ott said.

The United States needs 1.1 million new homes built every year just to keep up with demand. From 2010 to 2020, the country only built just over six million new homes, creating a big gap between the supply and demand, Miller said.

"In the spring of 2020, sellers who were getting ready to put their house on the market all of a sudden said, 'We're not putting our house on the market, we're gonna stay put,'" Miller said.

Some buyers at the time got desperate not wanting to remain in multifamily housing complexes and snatched up what was listed within a quick amount of time — about 90 days from the end of April to July in 2020, Miller said.

"We saw our inventory numbers just shrink tremendously and the supply wasn't being replenished," he said. "People can still buy cheaper than rent. When you're renting, you could say the interest rate is 100%, because there is no return on your investment. So I'm always going to push somebody to buy if that's affordable for them."

Baby formula shortage causes panic, stress among Lynchburg-area parents

Rachael Smith

May 21, 2022



Bentley Bryant, 4, plays with toys while his formula is administered through a G-tube, or a gastrostomy tube, at home with his mother, Meghan Farrar, in Lynchburg on Wednesday.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

Five times per day, Meghan Farrar feeds her 4-year-old son Bentley through a gastrostomy tube, often called a G-tube, which is how he has eaten since he was born.

The surgically placed device is used to give direct access to a child's stomach for supplemental feeding. Bentley was born with CHARGE Syndrome, a disorder that affects many areas of the body including causing heart defects, airway abnormalities, feeding issues and obsessive compulsive disorder, as well as sensory and balance issues and loss of hearing.

"He doesn't have [the] option to eat food by mouth, so we have special formula delivered every month," she said.

The formula, Compleat Pediatric, cannot be bought in stores and has to be delivered to their Lynchburg home the first of each month — but the family's next month's shipment still hadn't come by May 17, and supply was running out quickly.

Baby formula has been in short supply recently, triggered by a safety-related closure of the country's largest formula manufacturing plant, the Abbott Nutrition facility in Michigan. The factory is expected to be up and running soon, though it could be several weeks before supplies return to normal. Other measures have been taken to address the crisis, including the FDA easing rules to allow more imported baby formula and the Biden administration invoking the federal Defense Production Act to speed up manufacturing.

Farrar had heard rumblings about the baby formula shortage but hadn't taken it too seriously until that point. She called the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) as well as her pediatrician but still couldn't get the specific formula for her child.

Finally, she reached out to her church as a last-ditch effort. Within a few hours, she had formula showing up at her door.

"The church brought an infant/toddler formula that he was on a year ago, but the formula will eventually make him sick because his body isn't used to it anymore and it also doesn't offer enough calories," she said. "It's not the right kind, but it's enough to buy us some time."

As of May 17, she only had two cases of the formula, which would last her son just more than a week.

"Now I'm in panic mode," she said. "I'm really stressed too and I'm very scared. This is definitely real."

Meredith Fulcher, Healthy Families program manager at the Lynchburg-based nonprofit HumanKind, said staff has reported it's been a challenging time for families to feed their children.

"Not all but a majority of the population we serve receive some sort of government benefit and receive [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] and WIC and what we've heard from our staff is that the things that are covered under WIC are not available on the shelf, so families who would typically not have to account for that formula payment are now having to pay out of pocket," she said.

Transportation also is an issue for some clients and they have to go into multiple stores to find the formula their children need, she said.

She said there has been a lot of misinformation on the topic and she advises families not to listen to everything being shared on social media.

"There's been a few recipes circulating for homemade formula that are really not safe for babies," she said. "And so our goal has been to provide problem solving and education for our families. The staff has encouraged clients to speak to their pediatricians and see if maybe they have sample cans."

WIC advises families to not make homemade formula, to not feed babies cow's milk or diluted formula unless instructed by a doctor and to not buy formula online that is from outside of the United States.

She has seen people who advise to just breastfeed. But it's not that easy, Fulcher said.

"We've seen a lot of support for breastfeeding diminish because of COVID, so families really don't have the resources and support they need to even make that an option," she said. "So that's kind of another facet to the formula crisis. Breastfeeding is not the answer to everything, but a lot of families aren't choosing that option right now because they don't know where to go and they don't know what support is out there."

She said she couldn't guess how long the formula shortage will be an issue but advises families to work with their pediatricians and see if they can switch to a different brand or type of formula.

"For all of us as a community going forward, if there's a way we could have a milk bank, I think that will be fantastic," she said.

A milk bank collects breast milk from mothers who have more than their babies need, then screens, pasteurizes, and tests it and dispenses it to premature and fragile infants in need, either in hospitals or homes.

The American Academy of Pediatrics lists guidelines and standards as well as a statement as to how to help ease the effect of formula shortages.

It advises families to buy no more than 10 days to two weeks' supply of formula at a time, consider drug stores or smaller stores to find formula and, if feasible, buy formula online.

However, Dr. Kirsten Madea, medical director and incoming chief medical officer at Johnson Health Center, said she doesn't know if the majority of patients at the clinic can afford to continually get formula that way.

"Our patients primarily get their formula through a prescription that the provider writes and sends to the health department for the WIC program," she said.

For most babies, it is OK to switch to any formula unless the baby has a very specific medical condition where they need what's called extensively hydrolyzed formula, or an amino acid-based formula and, according to Madea, that's not where the shortage is.

"We've had the occasional call asking for a new prescription to be written by the provider to send it to their local health department with one of these alternatives," she said. "That's the most common call. And I have yet to have a patient telling me they couldn't get formula."

She advises parents to check social media groups dedicated to infant feeding and formula who are exchanging products.

Candice Brooks, an Amherst County mother, started the Facebook group Lynchburg Formula hunters, when she heard from more and more mothers who were having a hard time finding formula.

"I have all kinds of moms on my Facebook and I see them all posting, 'Hey, do you know where this formula is?' And they're all reaching out in different pages and different friends, and I was just like, 'Hey, let's just get them all together in one place so we can all help each other out,'" she said. "I hate to see babies being hospitalized from lack of food. It's quite ridiculous. That's the one thing you shouldn't have to worry about, is if your baby's going to eat."

She has been amazed in the ways the community has come together.

Brooks said one lady joined the group solely to share photos of grocery store shelves indicating where formula is found. Those living states away are shipping formula to moms in need. Women who don't know one another are picking it up for each other.

"Even people that aren't moms are trying to help out," she said. "The formula shortage is a bad thing but all we ever see is bad things and to see that everybody is coming together to try to help all these babies — little innocent babies can't help it — it's really sweet."

Jackie Weaver, senior director for Centra's Women's and Children's Services, said Abbott is its primary formula source and they have prioritized the special-care formulas.

“Any issues within hospital supply were related to the normal COVID supply-chain issues but did not at all reach patient level of concern because our buyers and formula partners have done an excellent job staying ahead. In the hospital, we have not had an interruption to product,” she said.

She said donor milk bank donations go to Prolacta — a research driven company dedicated to advancing the science of human milk — Prolacta then processes the milk by checking for infectious process or substances like when someone donates blood. The donated milk then goes into one large collection.

“This product comes back to us as human milk and human milk fortifier,” she said. “Currently, this milk is only used in our [Intensive Care Nursery] with very low birth weight babies. This product has a specific calorie balance we can then modify based on these baby’s needs.”

Centra uses this product on very low birth weight babies because it helps reduce the risk of necrotizing enterocolitis, an intestinal condition that mostly affects premature babies.

“Our use of this product isn’t affected by formula availability but by patient type,” she said.

U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., who serves on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, released a video statement May 17 regarding new steps being taken to address the baby formula shortage.

“I know people are really, really worried about this shortage of infant formula in the United States. The shortage is driven by the fact that the largest manufacturer in the U.S. had to have their plant closed down because of safety concerns,” he said. “The last thing we want is to have tainted infant formula on the market, but that’s putting a short-term challenge in place that’s really affecting a lot of families.”

Kaine said he joined a letter from 30 senators to the manufacturers recently, urging them to increase production.

“... [I]f you have a youngster and this is causing you direct challenge,” Kaine said, “you should speak to your health care provider about alternative feeding strategies or you should also, if you’re eligible for the WIC program, go to signupwic.com and you can get information about how the WIC program might help you through this difficult time. The good news is we’re going to solve it, but we’ve got to do it as quickly as we can.”

Lynchburg hair salon promotes acceptance and open minds

Rachael Smith

Dec 19, 2022



Hair stylist Michelle Marie Ramsey poses in front of her home-based business, Michelle Marie Hair Salon, on Friday.
Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Hair stylist Michelle Ramsey describes herself and her brand as “colorful, wholesome and accepting.”

But her life wasn’t always that way.

Growing up, Ramsey said, she was often told she was too much. She was told to sit down, quiet down, to control herself and be still so she could fit into a box of what she was supposed to act like.

“And I tried for a really long time. I even did at the beginning of my career try so hard to become the blonding specialist because that’s what I thought that people wanted from me, because that’s what they requested of me. And it wasn’t until I reached 25 years old, I realized it doesn’t matter what I do, because it’s not going to make these other people happy. So I decided that I needed to start living for myself instead of living for the ideas of other people. And I figured that if I remained true to myself, then the rest would come,” she said.

Through this acceptance of herself, Ramsey wants others to know they deserve to live their full authentic selves, regardless of whether it means offending other people.

“The amount of growth that I have seen in four years for me as a person ... I am not the same person I was. My brand is not the same. My lifestyle is not the same. Nothing about me is the same,” she said.

Michelle Marie Hair Salon is located at 834 Rivermont Ave. and can easily be identified from the street by the large pair of yellow scissors in the front yard and rainbow flag hanging from the porch.

The first thing clients will most likely see when they first walk into Ramsey's salon, which doubles as her family home, is Indy, a dachshund beagle mix. They'll see a large coffee bar on the right and look to the ceiling and see a rainbow ribbon chandelier that Ramsey and her husband used as a centerpiece at their wedding this past spring.

Ramsey, 28, grew up in Campbell County and attended Heritage High School, graduating in 2012. She also attended cosmetology school through the vocational tech school there when she was 16. But cosmetology wasn't her first choice as a career.

"My first choice was actually for elementary education and the class was full. So my second choice was cosmetology and they put me in there," she said. "Sixteen-year-old me thought that I would use cosmetology as a way to pay for college and get my degree in elementary education. And I still wanted to be able to help children. I just didn't realize that I was going to love hair so much and I just fell in love with it and it took me all of five minutes, once I got my toes wet, to decide."

What she fell in love with was the instant gratification — the opportunity to create something people love.

"It's like art. I love that people love my art and view it as art form," she said.

She found her niche was giving people vivid, rainbow colors in their hair, which she is now known for.

"You don't see it a lot, especially around here," Ramsey said. "There are people that specialize in blondes, there are a lot of people that can do brunettes and redheads but there are not many stylists here that actually can do what I do."

Maureen Byrd has been a client of Ramsey's for four years and frequently changes the color of her hair. In fact, she's changed it four times in this year.

She continues not only to come back to Ramsey but also routinely passes out her business cards to patients at Centra's Pearson Cancer Center where Byrd works.

"I deal with a lot of cancer patients, and I like to change my hair color for them, and when they ask me if I do it myself, I'm like, 'No, it'd be a hot mess; I have a stylist who does it,'" she said.

Byrd said she has found some hair stylists to be close-minded, so she enjoys that Ramsey is the opposite.

"A lot of traditional salons have either seasoned stylists that are set in their ways and they're not really willing to be open-minded to other cultures, other sexualities, other religions, whatever. Michelle was one of those people that is like, 'OK, I'm not going to judge you. This is a judgment-free place.' And that's why I keep coming here is because she knows what she's doing. And we can have some of the most off-the-wall conversations that most normal people would think we belong in a mental hospital," she said.

Ramsey said people in this community are becoming more open-minded and accepting, though.

“When we first moved here when I was 9 years old, Lynchburg was a very conservative town, but within the last three years it has really taken off in the more progressive mindset,” she said. “You’re getting a lot of people that are moving in from out of state, especially from up north. But with that, is bringing this creativity and these open concepts and it’s really allowing us as artists to kind of demonstrate that we can do all of these wonderful things.”

It’s a goal of Ramsey’s to make sure that all people fit in and she’s happy to be a part of that change.

“I think I felt unaccepted as a stylist in the industry,” she said. “There are a lot of businesses and companies that were more structured and a little bit more stiff and by the book. You’re dressed in all black and you have to have this pristine perspective on professionalism. And while I am a professional, I don’t consider myself in the definition of professionalism. I consider myself real.”

She said she doesn’t want people coming into her salon thinking they have to put on their best face. She says she wants them instead to come in on the hardest day of their life and be able to cry in the chair while she cries with them.

“Then they get to leave feeling like they got to release all of that emotion and they can leave it here. They don’t have to take it with them,” she said.

Ramsey’s son, her husband, her husband’s daughter and their nephew all live in the circa 1911 home which she says is a symbol of growth and rebirth.

“Our family is very open-minded, very accepting of every flaw,” she said. “I never want to turn somebody away because they’ve made a mistake because I’ve made mistakes too. I’m well aware of myself to know that I’ve definitely made mistakes, but I don’t agree that it should be hung over somebody’s head.”

Not on purpose, her salon has become well-known in the LBGQT community and she does hair for the transgender community as well.

“So our home has become that starting line for a lot of people changing,” she said.

She’s had a lot of people find her on the Strands for Trans website, a registry of trans-friendly barbershops and hair salons, and she has served clients from Petersburg, Richmond and Charlottesville.

“I didn’t intentionally go out and be like, ‘I’m going to represent Hill City Pride. I’m going to represent moms for special-needs children,’ I just have a very loud personality. So it’s very easy for me to talk to people,” she said.

She’s also become known as a safe place for clients either with disabilities or who have children with disabilities.

Ramsey’s son, who is 4, has autism spectrum disorder and she wants to make sure that no matter where he goes in the world, he has a voice.

“He doesn’t really have one right now, but it doesn’t mean that he won’t get one and I want to make sure that he gets treated for the exact wonderful little human that he is and not be cast aside,” she said. “I don’t want him to be looked over, essentially because he deserves care and friends and love and like acceptance for exactly who he is.”

She welcomes all people to come in, lets their children play or color in the salon and will feed them snacks if they're hungry. She says she wants clients to feel like they're walking into their best friend's house and can walk into the kitchen and dig around in the fridge.

"I'm a big fan of the statement of it takes a village to raise children and nobody should be by themselves," she said. "I don't feel like you have to do it by yourself. So if you bring your kids here, I'm gonna look out for them. So if you tell me that you're struggling with groceries, I'm going to feed your kids while they're here. It would never occur to me to do anything otherwise."