



The Tri-State Buyer's Guide

Buying a Home in Maryland, Delaware & Pennsylvania

Smart Moves Start with Michael

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Welcome — Let's Find Your Home

Buying a home is one of the biggest moves you'll ever make — and if you're shopping near the Maryland–Delaware–Pennsylvania corner of the map, it comes with a twist most buyers never think about: three states, three sets of taxes, three sets of rules, sometimes within a 20-minute drive of each other. That's exactly where I work every day.

I'm Michael Saunders — The Tri-State Negotiator. I'm a REALTOR® with RE/MAX Vision, licensed across the full states of Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, based in North East, MD at the crossroads of all three. This guide walks you through the buying process step by step, explains the things that changed for buyers in recent years, and covers the tri-state differences that can save you real money at the closing table.

Read it straight through or jump to the section you need. And when you're ready to talk — questions don't keep business hours, and neither do I.

— Mike

What's Inside

- The Home-Buying Roadmap — 10 steps from first thought to keys in hand
- Buyer's Market vs. Seller's Market — and what it means for your offer
- Needs vs. Wants — the worksheet that keeps your search on track
- Written Buyer Agreements — what they are and why you'll sign one
- Ten Questions to Ask Before Hiring a Buyer's Agent
- How the MLS Really Works
- Winning in a Multiple-Offer Situation
- Buying Across State Lines — MD vs. DE vs. PA at the closing table
- Your Moving Checklist Starter



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The Home-Buying Roadmap

Ten steps, in the order they should happen.

1. Check your credit and savings

Pull your credit reports, correct errors, and get a realistic picture of your down payment and closing-cost funds. You don't need 20% down — many buyers put down far less.

2. Get pre-approved, not just pre-qualified

A pre-approval letter from a lender tells sellers you're a real buyer with verified finances. In this market, most listing agents won't take an offer seriously without one.

3. Hire your buyer's agent

Interview agents (see the Ten Questions section), agree on services and compensation in writing, and sign a written buyer agreement before touring homes together.

4. Build your needs vs. wants list

Decide what's non-negotiable and what's a nice-to-have — including which STATE works best for your taxes, commute, and schools. Use the worksheet in this guide.

5. Search smart

Your agent sets up MLS alerts so you see every new listing that fits — often before the big websites catch up. Tour promptly; good homes move fast.

6. Make a competitive offer

Your agent runs the comparable sales, factors in market conditions, and structures price, deposit, dates, and contingencies to fit your situation.

7. Negotiate

Counters on price, credits, repairs, timing — this is where a strong negotiator earns their keep. It's in my name for a reason.

8. Inspections and appraisal

A licensed home inspector checks the house; the lender's appraiser confirms value. Findings can be negotiated — repairs, credits, or price adjustments.

9. Final loan approval and walk-through

Keep your finances steady (no new cars, no new credit cards). Do a final walk-through right before closing to confirm the home's condition.

10. Settlement day

Sign, fund, record — and get your keys. In MD, DE, and PA a settlement/title company or attorney runs the closing and calculates the exact taxes and fees for your address.

Buyer's Market vs. Seller's Market

Market conditions decide how much leverage you have — and your strategy should change with them.

Seller's market

More buyers than homes. Listings sell fast, often over asking, sometimes with multiple offers. Expect to move quickly, keep your offer clean, and lean on your pre-approval. Low inventory months in our tri-state area usually look like this.

Buyer's market

More homes than buyers. Days-on-market stretch out, price cuts appear, and sellers negotiate. This is when you can ask for closing-cost credits, repairs, and better terms.

How to tell which one you're in

- Months of inventory — under ~4 months favors sellers; over ~6 favors buyers.
- Days on market — falling means competition; rising means leverage for you.
- Sale-to-list price ratio — homes closing over asking signals a seller's market.
- It's local — Cecil County can behave differently than Chester County or New Castle County in the same month. I track all three and will tell you straight what the data says.

Needs vs. Wants

Every buyer starts with a wish list. The market trims it. Sorting the list BEFORE you fall in love with a house keeps decisions clear when it counts.

NEEDS — deal-breakers	WANTS — nice-to-haves
Max monthly payment you're comfortable with Minimum bedrooms / bathrooms Commute limit (minutes, not miles) School district requirements Must-have accessibility features State preference (taxes, work location)	Garage / workshop / acreage Updated kitchen or baths Pool, deck, finished basement Specific style or age of home Walkability, water view Room to grow

Rule of thumb: if a home misses a NEED, walk away no matter how charming it is. If it misses a WANT, ask what it would cost to add later — sometimes the answer is surprisingly small.

Written Buyer Agreements

Since the industry practice changes of 2024, buyers working with an agent sign a written buyer agreement before touring homes together. Far from red tape, it's your protection — it puts in writing exactly what your agent will do for you and what it costs.

What the agreement covers

- Services — what your agent will do: search, tour, advise, negotiate, manage the deal to closing.
- Compensation — how your agent gets paid, in a specific dollar amount or percentage. It cannot be open-ended.
- Duration and area — how long the agreement lasts and where it applies.
- Exclusivity — whether you're working with this agent only, or non-exclusively.

Three things every buyer should know

- It's negotiable. Services, term, area, and compensation are all agreed between you and your agent — ask questions before you sign.
- Compensation can still come from the seller's side. Many sellers offer to cover some or all of the buyer-agent fee to attract offers; your agent will pursue that for you in the contract.
- Don't sign what you don't understand. A good agent walks you through every line first. I do, every time.

Ten Questions to Ask a Buyer's Agent

Interview before you hire — any good agent welcomes it. Ask:

1. Are you a REALTOR® — bound by the NAR Code of Ethics?
2. Which states are you licensed in? (If your search crosses state lines, this one matters a lot.)
3. How well do you know the specific counties and towns I'm looking in?
4. How many buyers have you helped close in the past year?
5. How will you find me homes — and how fast will I see new listings?
6. How do you approach negotiations? Walk me through a recent win.
7. What does your buyer agreement cover, and what will your services cost me?
8. Who else will I work with — lenders, inspectors, title companies you trust?
9. How do we communicate — and how fast do you respond?
10. Why should I choose you over the last agent I talked to?

My answers to all ten: one call away — 410-920-8267.

How the MLS Really Works

The Multiple Listing Service is the professional database where licensed agents share listings and cooperate to get homes sold. Our region runs on Bright MLS — one of the largest in the country, covering Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and beyond.

- It's the source. The big consumer websites pull most of their data FROM the MLS — often on a delay. Working with an agent means seeing listings at the source, sooner.
- It's verified. Listing agents are accountable for accuracy under MLS rules — unlike open websites, where anyone can post anything.
- It works for you. Your agent sets custom alerts matched to your needs list, so new homes hit your inbox the moment they're listed.
- Search it through me. My Bright MLS home search is free at tristatenegotiator.com — every active listing across the tri-state area.

Winning in a Multiple-Offer Situation

When several buyers want the same house, price is only part of the picture. Sellers weigh certainty, timing, and terms. Ways to strengthen your hand:

- Lead with your pre-approval — from a reputable local lender the listing side recognizes.
- Right-size your deposit. A stronger earnest money deposit signals commitment.
- Be flexible on settlement date — matching the seller's timeline can beat a higher price.
- Keep contingencies lean but smart. Shorten timelines where you safely can; dropping protections entirely is rarely wise, and I'll tell you when it isn't.
- Escalation clauses, appraisal-gap coverage, rent-backs — tools we can deploy case by case.
- Know the rules of the game. Sellers aren't required to disclose other offers' terms, and every offer situation is different. Having a negotiator on your side is the whole point.

Buying Across State Lines: MD vs. DE vs. PA

Here's the tri-state twist: the SAME purchase price can cost you a different amount at closing — and a different amount every year after — depending on which side of a state line the house sits on. The quick lay of the land:

	Maryland	Delaware	Pennsylvania
Transfer taxes at closing	0.5% state (0.25% for qualifying first-time MD buyers, paid by the seller) + county transfer & recordation taxes	Highest of the three: 3–4% combined state/county, customarily split buyer/seller; first-time buyer credit can reduce the buyer's share	1% state + local transfer tax (commonly ~1% more; some cities much higher)
Property taxes (ongoing)	Middle of the pack; Homestead Credit caps assessment increases on your primary home	Generally the lowest of the three	Generally the highest, and school district matters a LOT — two similar homes can carry very different bills
Sales tax	6%	0% — none	6% (higher in Philadelphia/Allegheny)
State income tax	Graduated + a county income tax on top — the heaviest combined	Graduated, up to 6.6%; retiree-friendly exclusions	Flat 3.07% + local earned income tax in most places
New-resident DMV deadline	License & vehicle: 60 days	License & vehicle: 60 days (vehicle document fee applies)	Tightest: vehicle title/registration within 20 days

Working in one state and living in another? Maryland and Pennsylvania have a wage reciprocity agreement — generally only your home state taxes your paycheck. Delaware has no such agreement with either, which means nonresident returns and credits. Get payroll withholding set up with HR BEFORE the move, and confirm the details with a tax professional.

Rates change and every address is different — have the title company or settlement attorney run the exact numbers for any home you're serious about, and verify tax questions with a CPA. The full Tri-State Tax & Moving Guide on my website digs deeper, with official state links.

Your Moving Checklist Starter

- USPS mail forwarding — then remember it does NOT update your license, voter registration, banks, or insurance. Those are separate.
- Driver's license, vehicle title/registration, inspection — each state has its own new-resident deadline (see table above).
- Insurance — re-quote auto and homeowners at the new address; premiums shift by state and even by ZIP.
- Voter registration, E-ZPass, utilities, payroll withholding, school enrollment — one account at a time.

- Know your new neighborhood before you commit — home values, schools, commute times, and cost of living for any MD/DE/PA address are free to explore at tristatenegotiator.com.



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Ready When You Are

Whether you're buying your first home, crossing a state line, or just starting to look — let's talk about your smart move.

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