

YOUR HOME

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TIPS AND TRENDS TO HELP MAXIMIZE HOME BUYING AND SELLING

CENTS AND SENSIBILITY

Creating a household budget is hardly a fun exercise, but it is a necessity, especially in these tough economic times. Determining where monthly paychecks go can help rein in bad spending habits and create new, fiscally friendly ones.

To start, financial planners suggest you gather a year's worth of bills and loan payments to create a complete picture of your expenses. Make a list and assign each to a category, such as groceries, utilities, mortgage, auto and entertainment. Be sure to note when your spending increases throughout the year, such as around holidays or annual vacations.

Next, determine fixed and variable expenses. Fixed expenses have little to no change each month, such as mortgage, car payments or cable bills. Variable expenses change monthly—groceries, gas or personal expenses such as morning coffee runs.

Once you've sorted your expenses and calculated a monthly average, figure out your monthly income by checking your pay stubs and other sources of revenue. Ideally, your expenses should not be greater than your income. Your ultimate goal is to create a "zero-dollar budget" to see exactly where each dollar of your income goes. The money left over should be put into a savings account or used to pay down credit card debts.

When you're through with this exercise, look for ways to build an emergency fund. Consider putting aside enough for three to six months' living expenses. If this number is too daunting, set a goal for smaller amounts, like \$1,000 to \$3,000.



SPARE CACHE

Is storage space a problem in your home? Is the crunch of clutter overwhelming your life? Consider these creative solutions.

For starters, make sure furniture is doing double duty. Invest in ottomans with hidden storage to stash remote controls and blankets and a coffee table with drawers or a bottom shelf to hold magazines. Consider putting a chest in the foyer to store sports equipment and shoes or installing coat hooks on the wall to free up more hall closet space.

Boxes and jars are your best friends when it comes to organizing your odds and ends. Group like items together — such as old letters, cards or photos — and store in colorful boxes. Label the outside of the box so you know what's inside, and use the same trick to organize shoes.

Think tall. Choose vertical, not horizontal, bookshelves to conserve space, and display framed photos or artwork on the upper shelves where access isn't as important. Put frequently used items, such as recipe books, CDs or DVDs, on bottom shelves.

Make better use of the space under your bed with clear bins for storing extra linens or off-season clothing (put clothes in vacuum-sealed bags to conserve even more space). If your bed doesn't have much space underneath, consider putting it on risers.

In the kitchen, hang pots on an overhead rack rather than stowing them in cupboards, and put frequently used utensils like spatulas and whisks in an easily accessible vase on the counter.



fast fact >> >> >> >> >>

Two out of three U.S. adults have changed their cooking and eating habits because of the economy; 51 percent eat dinner at home more often and 37 percent have strict shopping budgets.

Source: Whole Foods Market's annual Food Shopping Trends Tracker survey



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BROUGHT TO YOU BY YOUR REALTOR[®], MELANIA SANDRA
A Certified Residential Specialist
Direct: (702) 526-7809 E-mail: melania@MelaniaSandra.com
Website: www.MelaniaSandra.com



Most New Year's resolutions have some kind of health angle — work out more, eat right and so on — so why not give your home the same kind of revamp? Resolve to keep your home healthier this year with this seasonal checklist.

Spring

- ✓ Clean your gutters. Backed-up gutters can wreak havoc on siding and cause flooding. Scoop out leaves and debris with a trowel or hire professionals to do it.

- ✓ Check your roof. Wintry weather may have damaged the surface, and the first big rainstorm, left unchecked, could cause significant problems. Replace shingles as needed.
- ✓ If your fireplace got a workout during the winter months, give it a clean sweep. Call in the experts to inspect and clean creosote buildup.

Summer

- ✓ Walk around your house to check for unsealed spots where squirrels or mice could sneak in. Look carefully for termites or ants, too. Inside, check your attic and make sure egress points are sealed tightly.
- ✓ Get ready for the warm season by giving any outdoor equipment (pools, swing sets, etc.) a thorough, top-to-bottom cleaning.

Fall

- ✓ Ensure your furnace is in prime shape for the cold months ahead, and change all the air filters in your home.
- ✓ Make sure your house is adequately sealed. Apply weather stripping (such as tape, felt, foam or vinyl tubing) around doors or windows.
- ✓ Trim branches near your home or roof to prevent damage when wintry weather hits.

Winter

- ✓ Drain and insulate outdoor pipes to prevent freezing.
- ✓ Check for damaged sidewalk, driveway or stairs, and repair them before the first snow to avoid dangerous mishaps.

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