YOUR STEP-BY-STEP ROADMAP

First-Time Home Buyer Guide

Everything you need to confidently buy your first home in Casa Grande, Pinal County, and across Arizona - from credit prep to closing day.

Josh Bernal

REALTOR® | YOST REALTY GROUP AT RE/MAX CASA GRANDE

MOBILE
(480) 773-4489

OFFICE
(520) 836-1717

EMAIL
josh@yosthomes.com

WEBSITE
joshbernalrealtor.com

OFFICE ADDRESS
317 E. Cottonwood Ln, Ste C, Casa Grande, AZ 85122

A NOTE FROM YOUR AGENT

Buying your first home should feel exciting, not overwhelming.

Hi, I'm Josh Bernal, REALTOR® with Yost Realty Group at RE/MAX Casa Grande. I've been licensed in Arizona since 2015, but my real estate background actually goes back to 2007 in mortgage servicing and property claims. In 2024 I earned my license as a property adjuster and claims specialist, which adds another layer to how I read deals, inspections, and risk for my clients.

I'm a 5th generation Arizona native. I grew up on a farm in Chandler, moved to Casa Grande in 2016, and that farm-kid work ethic still shapes how I show up for every client. Outside of work, I'm a husband and dad, and you'll usually find me outside with my family, fishing, or training Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

I built this guide for first-time buyers, the people Googling things like *"how much money do I really need?"* and *"what's earnest money?"* at 11 p.m. on a Tuesday. You're not alone, and you're not behind. You just need a clear map.

Talk soon,
Josh

CREDENTIALS & RECOGNITION

- Licensed Arizona Salesperson since 2015 · **AZ License SA658510000**
- **Greatest of Grande Top 3 Agents (2020)**
- ABR® Accredited Buyer Representative
- RE/MAX® 100% Club (2021)
- RE/MAX® Executive Club (2019, 2020)
- National Association of REALTORS® member
- Licensed property adjuster & claims specialist (2024)

This guide is educational only — not legal, tax, or financial advice. Loan programs and Arizona statutes change; verify current details with your lender, attorney, or tax professional.

FROM BUYERS WHO'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

What my clients say

Buying your first home is a big deal. Here's what a few of the buyers I've worked with have shared after closing.

"

Josh was excellent and went the extra mile. My wife and I were living on the east coast when we bought the house. Josh took video and made sure the house was exactly how we wanted.

OUT-OF-STATE BUYER · 5 STARS

"

Josh at Yost Realty was great to work with. This was my first home purchase and they guided me through the process. They were very responsive on text and email to any questions I had.

FIRST-TIME BUYER · 5 STARS

"

Josh Bernal is the best! Patient, responsive, honest. Made the whole process so much less stressful than I expected.

CASA GRANDE BUYER · 5 STARS

HOW I WORK

Patient. Responsive. Honest. No pressure to buy the wrong home. Clear communication by call, text, or email, whichever you prefer. And I stay in your corner long after closing for warranty issues, contractor referrals, and your next move.

5-star rating on Zillow and consistent repeat & referral business.

Reviews shown reflect verified client feedback. Full review history available on Zillow, Google, and Yost Realty Group profile pages.

AGENCY, COMPENSATION & FAIR HOUSING

Who works for whom — and how I'm paid

Before we look at a single home, Arizona law and the August 2024 NAR rules require us to put two things in writing: **who I represent** and **how I'm compensated.** Here's how it works.

The three agency relationships

BUYER'S BROKER (MOST COMMON FOR YOU)

I represent *you*. I owe you the fiduciary duties of loyalty, obedience, disclosure, confidentiality, and accounting. I don't share your bottom line with the seller without your written permission.

SELLER'S BROKER

The listing agent represents the *seller*. They owe the seller those same duties — not you. They are honest with you, but they are not on your side at the negotiating table.

LIMITED REPRESENTATION (A.K.A. DUAL AGENCY)

When one brokerage represents both sides of the same transaction. Legal in Arizona *only with both parties' informed written consent.* Some duties (loyalty, full disclosure of confidential info) are necessarily limited. If this ever comes up — for example, if you want to look at a Yost-listed home — we'll discuss it in advance and you'll sign off.

We'll formalize this in the **Real Estate Agency Disclosure & Election (READE)** form before our first substantive conversation.

IMPORTANT — ARIZONA DISCLOSURE CARVE-OUTS (A.R.S. § 32-2156)

Arizona law does **not** require sellers or brokers to disclose that a property: (1) was the site of a natural death, suicide, homicide, or felony; (2) was owned or occupied by a person exposed to HIV or diagnosed with AIDS or any other disease not transmitted through common occupancy; or (3) is in the vicinity of a registered sex offender. If any of these matter to you, **tell me up front** so we can investigate during the inspection period.

How I'm compensated — the short, honest version

Compensation is fully negotiable. It is NOT set by law, by any board, by any association of REALTORS®, by the multiple listing service, or by RE/MAX.

We agree on it in writing in the **Buyer-Broker Agreement to Show Property** before I show you a single home. Depending on the deal, my compensation can be paid by:

- **You** directly at closing,

- **The seller** as a concession we negotiate in the purchase contract, or
- **The seller's broker** as a credit toward the amount you've agreed to pay me.

I'll never collect more than what's written in our agreement. If there's any difference, it goes to you as a credit at closing.

> **Fair Housing — my commitment to you.** I follow all federal, state, and local fair-housing laws. It is illegal to discriminate in the sale, rental, financing, or marketing of housing on the basis of **race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including gender identity and sexual orientation), familial status, or disability.** Under A.R.S. § 32-2107.01, any deed restriction or covenant based on race, religion, color, handicap status, or national origin is invalid and unenforceable in Arizona. If you ever feel something I or anyone in this transaction has said or done crossed a line, tell me directly. You can also file a complaint with HUD at **hud.gov/fairhousing** or the Arizona Attorney General's Civil Rights Division.

WHAT'S INSIDE

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REFERENCE

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Why use a REALTOR® your first time?

You could try to buy a house on your own. People do. But here's the thing - when you're representing yourself, you're also negotiating against someone who does this every day for a living. The seller has a professional in their corner. You should too.

As of August 2024, Arizona REALTORS® are required to sign a written agreement with you **before** showing you any home. It's called the *Buyer-Broker Agreement to Show Property*. We'll walk through it together — I'll explain exactly who I represent, how long the agreement lasts, what kinds of property we'll look at, and how I'm compensated. **Compensation is fully negotiable. It is not set by law, by any board, by the MLS, or by RE/MAX.** See the next page for how the agency relationship works.

WHAT A GREAT BUYER'S AGENT ACTUALLY DOES

- Connects you with trusted local lenders, inspectors, title companies and contractors
- Pulls real comps so you don't overpay
- Writes contracts that protect *your* money
- Negotiates repairs, credits and price
- Handles the 100+ deadlines and paperwork items so you don't miss one
- Spots red flags in disclosures and inspection reports

WHAT I PERSONALLY PROMISE MY BUYERS

- Plain-English answers, every time
- No pressure - ever - to buy a specific home
- Honest feedback when a house has problems
- Fast response (call/text - I'll get back to you)
- I stay involved *after* closing for warranty issues, contractor referrals, and your next move

Quick reality check: The home buying process from "I want to start looking" to "I have the keys" usually takes **60 to 90 days**. The actual offer-to-close window is typically **30 to 45 days**. Plan accordingly - especially if you're coordinating a lease end or a move.

THE BIG PICTURE

The 10-step home buying roadmap

Here's the whole journey on one page. Each step is broken down in detail later in this guide. Don't worry - we tackle them one at a time.

1. **Get your finances in order**
   Pull your credit, list your debts and savings, and figure out what you can comfortably afford each month - not what a bank will let you borrow.

2. **Get pre-approved**
   Talk to a lender (or two). Get a real pre-approval letter, not a quick pre-qualification.

3. **Define your needs vs. wants**
   Be honest about what's a must-have, a nice-to-have, and a deal-breaker.

4. **Search for homes**
   I set you up on a direct MLS search so you see new listings the minute they hit.

5. **Tour and shortlist**
   Walk through homes with a critical eye - and a checklist.

6. **Make a strong offer**
   Price, earnest money, contingencies, close date - every line matters.

7. **Inspections & appraisal**
   You get a 10-day inspection period in Arizona - use it.

8. **Final loan approval**
   Your file goes to underwriting. Don't open new credit. (Seriously.)

9. **Final walk-through**
   Within 5 days of closing, we re-walk the house to confirm condition.

10. **Closing day**
    Sign documents, wire funds, get the keys. Welcome home.

PART ONE

The 10 steps, in detail.

Read these straight through, or jump to whichever step you're working on right now.

01

STEP 1

Get your finances in order

Before a single home tour, get clear on three numbers: your **credit score**, your **monthly debt-to-income ratio**, and your **cash on hand**. These three drive everything else.

Check your credit (free)

Pull all three bureaus at **annualcreditreport.com**. Look for: late payments, collections you forgot about, accounts you didn't open. Dispute errors before applying for a loan - fixes can take 30–60 days.

Credit Score	What it means for your mortgage
740+	Best rates available. You'll qualify almost anywhere.
680–739	Good rates. Conventional and FHA both wide open.
620–679	FHA is your friend. Conventional possible but pricier.
580–619	FHA still possible with 3.5% down. Work on the score first if you can.
Below 580	Pause and rebuild. We can map out a 6–12 month plan.

Calculate your debt-to-income (DTI)

Add up every monthly debt payment (car, student loans, credit card minimums, child support). Divide by your gross monthly income. Lenders generally want this number - *including* your new mortgage payment - under **43%**. Lower is better.

Build your savings buckets

DOWN PAYMENT

3%–20% of purchase price depending on loan type. We'll find the right balance.

CLOSING COSTS

Typically 2%–3% of the price. In AZ, often partially negotiable from the seller.

RESERVES

Aim for 3–6 months of mortgage payments after closing - for repairs and life.

DON'T DO THIS

Once you start the loan process, do **not** open new credit cards, finance a car, change jobs, or move big money around. Anything that changes your debt or income profile can blow up your approval days before closing.

STEP 2

Get pre-approved (the real Step 1)

A **pre-approval letter** is your golden ticket. Without one, most sellers in our market won't even consider your offer. With one, you're a serious buyer.

Pre-qualification vs. pre-approval - they are *not* the same

	Pre-qualification	Pre-approval
What it is	A quick conversation	A documented review of your finances
Credit pull?	Often soft	Hard pull
Documents needed	Few or none	W-2s, pay stubs, bank statements, IDs
Time	5 minutes	1–3 business days
Sellers care?	Not really	Yes - this is what matters

What your lender will ask for

- Two years of W-2s and tax returns (or 2 years of 1099s if self-employed)
- Last 2 pay stubs
- Last 2 months of bank statements (all pages)
- Government-issued ID
- Documentation for any large recent deposits
- Divorce decree or child support docs if applicable

> **Shop your lender like you'd shop your house.** A 0.25% difference in rate over 30 years on a $400,000 loan is roughly **$24,800**.

How much house can you actually afford?

The bank will approve you for more than you should spend. A safer ceiling: your total monthly housing cost (principal, interest, taxes, insurance, HOA) at **25%–30% of your gross monthly income.** That leaves room for life - vacations, kids' activities, savings, the surprise A/C repair.

STEP 3

Define your needs vs. wants

Every buyer says "we'll know it when we see it." Then they tour 12 homes, get exhausted, and put an offer on the wrong one. Doing this exercise upfront saves weeks of confusion.

NEEDS (DEAL-BREAKERS)

If it doesn't have these, we don't tour it.

- Number of bedrooms / bathrooms
- Maximum commute (work, school)
- School district or specific school
- Single story vs. two story (mobility, family)
- Garage capacity
- Yard / no yard (pets, kids)
- Budget ceiling (firm)

WANTS (NICE-TO-HAVES)

Bonus features that tip the scales.

- Pool
- RV gate / extra parking
- Open floor plan
- Updated kitchen / no popcorn ceilings
- Specific neighborhood or HOA amenities
- Smart home features
- Workshop / casita / office

Casa Grande & Pinal County considerations

- **Cooling matters more than heating.** Ask the age of the A/C unit - new units run $7,000–$12,000. SEER rating affects bills.
- **HOAs are common in newer subdivisions.** Read the CC&Rs before you commit. Some restrict RVs, sheds, paint colors, even satellite dishes.
- **Septic vs. sewer.** Rural and semi-rural homes often have septic - different inspection, different long-term costs.
- **Solar - owned vs. leased.** Leased solar is a huge gotcha. We'll dig into this if it comes up.
- **SRP vs. ED3 (Electrical District 3).** Different utility = different bill. Worth asking.

> **The 80% rule:** No home will hit 100% of your wishlist. If a home hits 80% - including all needs - it's probably your home. Don't lose a great house chasing a perfect one.

STEP 4

Search for homes the smart way

Zillow and Realtor.com are great for browsing. They are *not* great for buying. They're slow to update, sometimes show sold homes as active, and the "Zestimate" is not what your bank will lend on.

Here's what we do instead

1. **I set you up on a direct MLS search.** You'll get listings the second they go live - usually *before* they show up on Zillow.
2. **We tune your search together.** Too broad and you'll get noise. Too narrow and you'll miss winners.
3. **You favorite, reject, or "maybe."** I see your activity and refine recommendations.
4. **I scout off-market and coming-soon listings.** In a tight market, these can be your edge.

Red flags to watch for in listings

- "As-is, cash only" - usually means major repair issues
- Price drops within first 30 days - could mean overpriced from the start, or could mean an opportunity
- Listing photos taken from weird angles or only of one room - often hiding something
- Active for 90+ days in a normal market - buyers have walked for a reason
- No interior photos at all - investor flip, hoarder home, or major damage

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Some Zillow and Realtor.com listings are still showing as "Make an offer" when they're actually under contract. Always check with me before getting emotionally invested in a home you found online.

The neighborhood walk

Before you make an offer, drive the neighborhood at **three different times**: weekday morning, weeknight (8–9 p.m.), and Saturday afternoon. You're checking for traffic, noise, parking, lights, and the vibe. The house doesn't change - but the neighborhood does.

STEP 5

Tour, evaluate, and shortlist

Most buyers tour 8–15 homes before writing an offer. Some find "the one" on home #1. Either is fine. What matters is that you tour with intention.

What to look at - beyond the pretty stuff

EXTERIOR

- Roof condition (curling shingles, missing tiles)
- Foundation cracks (hairline = normal, wide = bad)
- Drainage - does the lot pitch away from the house?
- A/C condenser age (look for sticker)
- Water heater age, location, and type
- Fence condition and shared walls

INTERIOR

- Smells - pet, smoke, mildew, "covering something"
- Windows - single pane = high cooling bills
- Stains on ceilings (old leak?)
- Soft spots or sloping in floors
- Cabinet/door alignment (settling clues)
- Electrical panel age and capacity

Take photos and notes, every time

After three homes they all blur. Snap photos of: the front, the kitchen, the master, the backyard, and anything you didn't love. Add a one-line note: *"#4 - Maricopa - loved kitchen, weird master bath, smelled like dog."*

> **Sleep on it before you write.** Unless we're in a multiple-offer situation, don't write an offer the same day you tour. Excitement is not a strategy. (If we *are* in multiple offers, that's a different conversation - we'll move fast and smart.)

STEP 6

Make a strong offer (the Arizona contract)

In Arizona, we use the **AAR Residential Resale Real Estate Purchase Contract**. It's a standardized form, but every line is negotiable. Here's what we'll discuss before you sign.

Term	What it means	Typical range
Offer price	What you'll pay for the home	Depends on comps & market
Earnest money	"Skin in the game" deposit held by escrow	1%–2% of price
Inspection period	Time to inspect, investigate, & cancel	10 days unless we negotiate otherwise
Financing contingency	Your "out" if loan falls through	Through close (standard)
Appraisal contingency	Your "out" if home appraises low	Through close (standard)
Closing cost concessions	Seller chips in toward your closing costs	0%–3% - market dependent
Home warranty	1-year warranty on systems/ appliances	$500–$700, often seller-paid
Close of escrow date	When the deal officially closes	30–45 days from acceptance
Possession	When you get the keys	At recording (COE), unless we negotiate otherwise

The three letters that win houses

When multiple offers come in, sellers don't always take the highest price. They take the one most likely to *close*. We boost your odds with:

- **A strong pre-approval letter** from a local lender the listing agent recognizes
- **A short, sincere personal note** when appropriate (legal in AZ; not all sellers care, but some do)
- **Reasonable contingency timelines** - not waived, just tight enough to show seriousness

A COMMON TRAP

Waiving the inspection contingency to win an offer is almost always a bad idea on a first home. You'd be buying blind on what is likely the largest purchase of your life. There are better ways to make your offer competitive.

STEP 7

Inspections & appraisal

Your offer is accepted - congrats. Now the clock starts. In Arizona, you have a **10-day inspection period** by default (the "Buyer's Inspection Period"). Use every day.

Inspections to consider

STANDARD (ALMOST ALWAYS DO)

- **General home inspection** - $400–$600. The big one.
- **Termite (WDIIR)** - $50–$100. Often required by lender. Termites are very common in AZ.
- **Roof inspection** - included in general OR separate $150–$300

SITUATIONAL (WHEN THE HOME CALLS FOR IT)

- **Sewer scope** - $150–$300. Older homes, large trees.
- **Pool inspection** - $150–$300. If there's a pool, get one.
- **Septic inspection** - $400–$600. Rural homes.
- **HVAC tune-up & inspection** - $100–$200. If unit is 8+ years.
- **Mold / air quality** - $300–$500. Past leaks, weird smells.

The repair negotiation

After inspection, we can ask the seller to: **(1)** make the repairs, **(2)** credit you cash at closing, **(3)** reduce the price, or **(4)** any combination of the above. We pick our battles strategically - small cosmetic stuff usually isn't worth fighting over. Safety, structural, and systems issues absolutely are.

The appraisal

Your lender orders an independent appraisal to confirm the home is worth what you're paying. Three outcomes:

- **Appraisal comes in at or above price** - perfect, move on.
- **Appraisal comes in low** - you can renegotiate the price, bring extra cash to cover the gap, or walk away with earnest money refunded (depending on contract).
- **Appraisal comes in *way* above price** - congrats, you bought equity on day one.

The other clocks running during your inspection period

The 10-day inspection isn't your only deadline. Several other items have their own 5-day disapproval windows from the time you receive them:

Document	Where it comes from	Your window
Seller's Property Disclosure Statement (SPDS)	Seller, within 3 days of acceptance	Inspection Period or 5 days from receipt, whichever is later
Title Commitment + Schedule B documents	Title company	5 days from receipt
CC&Rs, HOA disclosures, governing docs	HOA or seller	5 days from receipt
Insurance Claims History (5-year CLUE)	Seller, within 5 days of acceptance	Inspection Period or 5 days from receipt, whichever is later
Affidavit of Disclosure (unincorporated land)	Seller, within 5 days of acceptance	Inspection Period or 5 days from receipt, whichever is later

Investigate everything that matters to you. The AAR/ADRE *Buyer Advisory* is a 13-page consumer reference covering soil, flood plains, mold, well/water, schools, airport noise, sex-offender registry, square footage, pool barriers, and more. Read it at **aaronline.com/manage-risk/buyer-advisory-3/**. If a topic matters to you, we'll investigate it during your inspection period.

WHAT ARIZONA LAW DOES NOT REQUIRE SELLERS OR BROKERS TO DISCLOSE

Under **A.R.S. § 32-2156**, sellers and brokers are not obligated to disclose that a property: (1) was the site of a natural death, suicide, homicide, or felony; (2) was owned or occupied by a person exposed to HIV or diagnosed with AIDS or any other disease not transmitted through common occupancy; or (3) is located in the vicinity of a registered sex offender. If any of these matter to you, tell me — we'll investigate via public records, local law enforcement, and the AZDPS / national registries during your inspection period.

STEP 8

Final loan approval

Your file goes to **underwriting** - the part of the bank that says yes or no. Expect to get follow-up document requests. Respond fast. Every day you delay can push closing.

> THE CARDINAL RULE OF UNDERWRITING
>
> **Don't change anything financial.** No new credit cards. No new car. No quitting your job. No big deposits or withdrawals. No co-signing for your cousin. Nothing. Wait until *after* you have the keys.

Step 9 - Final walk-through

Within 5 days of closing, we walk through one more time. We're confirming:

- Agreed-upon repairs were completed
- Nothing new has broken or changed
- Included appliances and fixtures are still there (no surprise swaps)
- The home is broom-clean (or however the contract specified)
- Utilities are still on so you can test things

Step 10 - Closing day

You'll sign documents at the title company (or do a remote/mobile notary). Bring:

- Two forms of ID (one must be a photo ID)
- A cashier's check or wire confirmation for your funds to close
- Patience - there are 50+ pages to sign

Once funds are wired and the deed is recorded with the Pinal County Recorder, you're **officially a homeowner**. Keys typically transfer at 3:00 p.m. the day of recording.

> **One last warning - wire fraud is real.** Scammers will impersonate the title company and email you fake wire instructions. **Always call the title company directly using a number you've verified separately** before sending a single dollar. I'll walk you through this when we get close.

PART TWO

The money stuff.

Down payment, closing costs, monthly costs, loan types, and Arizona-specific programs that can help you buy with less cash.

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THE FULL PICTURE

The real cost of buying and owning a home

The down payment is what everyone talks about. It's not the only thing you need cash for. Here's the full picture for a home around **$400,000**, a realistic mid-range price point for Casa Grande and surrounding Pinal County right now. Your specific numbers will vary.

Cash you need to close (out of pocket)

Item	Typical range	$400K example
Down payment (conventional 5%)	3% to 20%	$20,000
Loan origination & underwriting fees	~1% of loan	$3,800
Title insurance & escrow fees	$1,500 to $2,500	$2,100
Recording & transfer fees	$150 to $400	$300
Appraisal	$500 to $700	$600
Inspections (general + termite + roof)	$600 to $900	$750
Prepaid taxes & insurance (impound)	2 to 6 months	$2,800
Earnest money (credits back at close)	1% to 2%	$4,000 (returns)
	Estimated cash to close	**≈ $30,300**

Illustrative only. Actual costs depend on loan type, lender, and negotiated terms. Many of these can be offset by seller concessions or down payment assistance (see next page).

Monthly costs after you move in

Item	Typical $400K home, 5% down
Principal & interest (30-yr, ~7%)	~$2,530
Property taxes (Pinal County, ~0.65%)	~$215
Homeowner's insurance	~$140
Mortgage insurance (if <20% down)	~$190
HOA (if applicable)	$30 to $180

Item	Typical $400K home, 5% down
Utilities (AZ summer can be brutal)	$200 to $450
Maintenance reserve (1% of price ÷ 12)	~$335

Rule of thumb: Total monthly housing cost (PITI + HOA) should ideally stay between **25% and 30% of your gross monthly income**. That leaves room for life, savings, and surprises - and that's the difference between feeling rich in your new home and feeling stretched in it.

LOAN TYPES

Which loan is right for you?

There are four common loan types for first-time buyers in Arizona. Your lender will help you pick - but going in informed makes the conversation a lot better.

Loan	Min. down	Min. credit*	Best for
Conventional	3% (first-time buyer)	620+	Buyers with good credit who want to skip mortgage insurance ASAP (drops off at 20% equity)
FHA	3.5%	580+	Lower credit scores, higher DTI, lower down payment. MIP stays for life of loan in most cases.
VA	0%	No official min. (lenders set their own)	Active-duty military, veterans, eligible surviving spouses. No mortgage insurance.
USDA	0%	640+ typical	Buyers in USDA-eligible rural areas. Parts of Pinal County qualify - including portions of Casa Grande and surrounding towns.

*Lender overlays vary. These are general minimums; the lender you work with may require more.

2026 loan limits - Pinal County, AZ

CONFORMING (CONVENTIONAL)

$832,750

Maximum single-family loan amount eligible for sale to Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac.

FHA

$557,750

Maximum single-family FHA-insured loan amount for Pinal County in 2026.

PMI VS. MIP - YES, THEY'RE DIFFERENT

Conventional loans charge **PMI** (private mortgage insurance) when you put less than 20% down - and you can usually drop it once you hit 20% equity. FHA loans charge **MIP** (mortgage insurance premium) that typically stays for the life of the loan. Many buyers eventually refinance FHA → conventional once they have enough equity, specifically to ditch MIP.

ARIZONA-SPECIFIC HELP

Down payment assistance programs

Arizona has several legitimate programs that can help with down payment and closing costs. Most are misunderstood - buyers either don't know they exist or assume they "don't qualify." Many do. Here are the big ones for 2026.

MOST COMMON

HOME Plus by the Arizona Industrial Development Authority

The only state-run, statewide down payment assistance program in Arizona - available in every county, city, and ZIP code.

- **Up to 4%** of the loan amount, usable toward down payment *or* closing costs
- Structured as a **deferred soft second mortgage** - no interest, no payment
- **Fully forgiven after 60 months** (5 years) if you stay in the home
- 2026 income cap: borrower(s) annual income up to **$155,386**
- Works with conventional, FHA, VA, and USDA first mortgages
- Requires completion of a homebuyer education course before closing
- Funding is year-round and not depleted

Program details current as of early 2026 per homeplusaz.com. Always verify with your lender - terms and limits can update.

PATHWAY TO PURCHASE

Operates in select Arizona cities and provides up to 10% (max $20,000) in down payment assistance for qualifying buyers — income and purchase-price caps apply. Casa Grande and nearby Pinal County areas have historically been eligible - confirm current eligibility with your lender.

LOCAL LENDER & BANK PROGRAMS

Several local banks and credit unions offer their own first-time buyer programs with grants, reduced PMI, or lender credits. These rotate - I'll connect you with lenders who are running competitive programs right now.

A quick reminder: "First-time buyer" usually means you haven't owned a primary residence in the past **3 years** - not literally the first home you've ever bought. Many people qualify and don't realize it.

PART THREE

Reference.

Mistakes to avoid, terms to know, questions other buyers ask, and a checklist to track your progress.

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LEARN FROM OTHERS

Common first-time buyer mistakes

After years of closings across Pinal County, here are the patterns I see most often. Read this once and avoid them all.

1. HOUSE-SHOPPING BEFORE GETTING PRE-APPROVED

You'll either fall in love with something out of reach, or you'll lose your dream home to a buyer whose paperwork was ready.

2. MAXING OUT THE PRE-APPROVAL AMOUNT

The bank's "yes" is not the same as a "good idea." Stay 10–20% below your ceiling and keep room for life.

3. SKIPPING INSPECTIONS TO WIN AN OFFER

A $500 inspection has saved buyers tens of thousands of dollars. Don't waive it.

4. OPENING NEW CREDIT DURING ESCROW

New car, new credit card, financed furniture - any of these can crater your loan days before closing.

5. IGNORING THE HOA DOCUMENTS

CC&Rs control what you can and can't do with the home you're about to buy. Read them. I'll flag anything weird.

6. UNDERESTIMATING ONGOING COSTS

Property taxes, insurance, utilities, HOA, maintenance - plan for the whole bill, not just the mortgage.

7. FALLING IN LOVE WITH ONE HOUSE

Emotional buyers overpay and overlook problems. Stay objective until the contract is signed.

8. GOING IT ALONE WITH THE LISTING AGENT

The listing agent works for the seller. Always have your own representation - it almost always costs you nothing extra.

AN ARIZONA-SPECIFIC DECISION

Ways to take title in Arizona

Arizona is a **community property state.** How you take title to your home has significant legal, estate-planning, and tax consequences. We'll work through this with the title company, and you should run the final choice past an attorney or qualified tax professional.

Method	Who can hold	What happens at death	Notes
Community Property	Married couple only.	Each spouse can will their half. Decedent's estate must clear probate.	Both halves get a stepped-up tax basis at first death.
Community Property with Right of Survivorship	Married couple only.	Passes to surviving spouse *outside of probate.*	Both halves get a stepped-up tax basis at first death. Often the default choice for married AZ buyers.
Joint Tenancy with Right of Survivorship	Two or more people; no marriage required.	Passes to surviving joint tenant(s) outside of probate.	Only the decedent's share gets stepped-up basis. Any joint tenant can sell their interest unilaterally.
Tenancy in Common	Two or more; shares can be unequal (e.g., 60/40).	Decedent's share goes to their heirs by will or intestacy. Probate may be required.	Each owner's share has its own tax basis. Each share can be sold/transferred separately.
Sole and Separate	One person. If married, spouse signs a disclaimer deed.	Passes per will or intestacy. Probate likely.	AZ presumes property acquired by a married person is community unless documented otherwise.
Entity (LLC, trust, etc.)	The entity holds title.	Depends on entity terms (operating agreement, trust document).	Used for investment property, estate planning, or asset protection. Talk to your attorney.

Required disclaimer: Each method of taking title has significant legal and tax consequences. Title is not the agent's call — it's yours, ideally with input from your attorney or tax professional. The title company will prepare a Disclaimer Deed if a married person takes title as Sole and Separate.

Adapted from "Ways to Take Title in Arizona" — Security Title Agency.

THE YOST DIFFERENCE

You don't just get an agent. You get a team.

When you buy a home with me, you become a client of Yost Realty Group at RE/MAX Casa Grande — the same firm that's been serving Pinal County since 1995. That comes with real, practical benefits before, during, and after closing.

DURING YOUR TRANSACTION

- **A dedicated Closing Manager** tracks your deadlines so nothing slips through.
- **Vetted vendor recommendations** — lenders, inspectors, title companies, contractors, insurance agents.
- **Plain-English contract review** before every signature.
- **Top 100 RE/MAX team, year after year** — Wall Street Journal & Real Trends Top 300 Nationwide (5x).
- **RE/MAX worldwide network** — referrals to top agents in any city in North America for your friends and family.

AFTER CLOSING — THE PERKS CLUB

- **Free use of the Yost moving van** for local moves (2-day max, must be 21+, proof of insurance, return clean & fueled)
- **Free Notary Public** — call to schedule
- **Free fax service & copies** — handy at tax time
- **Recommendations for repair/service people** — the same vendors we trust ourselves
- **Worldwide agent referrals** — anywhere you or yours need to buy or sell next

> **The bigger picture:** Yost Realty Group has over 530 Google reviews and 30+ years of Pinal County experience. You're not just hiring me — you're hiring the team that backs me up.

SPEAK THE LANGUAGE

Glossary of terms

Appraisal
Independent professional opinion of a home's value, ordered by your lender.

ARM (Adjustable-Rate Mortgage)
A loan whose interest rate adjusts on a set schedule.

Closing Costs
Fees beyond the down payment paid at closing - typically 2–3% of price.

Close of Escrow (COE)
The day the property officially transfers ownership.

Comparative Market Analysis (CMA)
An estimate of value based on similar recent sales nearby.

Contingency
A condition that must be met for the contract to proceed (financing, inspection, appraisal).

Conventional Loan
A mortgage not insured by the federal government, typically sold to Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac.

DTI (Debt-to-Income)
Monthly debt payments divided by gross monthly income.

Earnest Money
Good-faith deposit you put down when an offer is accepted, held in escrow.

Escrow
Neutral third party holding funds and documents until closing.

FHA Loan
Government-insured loan with lower down payment and credit requirements.

HOA (Homeowners Association)
Organization that governs a community; collects dues and enforces rules.

Impound / Escrow Account
Account your lender uses to pay your taxes and insurance monthly.

Loan Estimate
3-page form from your lender showing terms, rate, and estimated costs.

MIP / PMI
Mortgage insurance - FHA's MIP vs. conventional's PMI.

MLS
The Multiple Listing Service - the official database of homes for sale.

Pre-Approval
Documented commitment from a lender for a specific loan amount.

Pre-Qualification
An informal estimate of what you might borrow. Not the same as pre-approval.

Principal & Interest (P&I)
The two main components of your mortgage payment.

PITI
Principal, Interest, Taxes, Insurance - your full monthly payment.

Points
Optional upfront payments to "buy down" your interest rate.

SPDS
Seller Property Disclosure Statement - Arizona's standard seller disclosure form.

Title Insurance

Protects you and your lender against undiscovered ownership claims on the property.

Underwriting

The bank's process of reviewing your file before final loan approval.

USDA Loan

Zero-down loan for eligible rural and semi-rural properties.

VA Loan

Zero-down loan for eligible service members, veterans, and surviving spouses.

Walk-Through

Final inspection of the home within ~5 days of closing.

REAL QUESTIONS, REAL ANSWERS

Frequently asked questions

Q. Do I really need 20% down?

No. That's an old rule. Conventional loans go as low as 3% down for first-time buyers, FHA as low as 3.5%, and VA/USDA can go to 0%. Less down means a higher monthly payment and mortgage insurance - we'll find the right balance for your situation.

Q. How much does a buyer's agent cost me?

Compensation for my services is **fully negotiable**. It is **not set by law**, by any board, association, multiple listing service, or by RE/MAX. We negotiate it in writing in the Buyer-Broker Agreement *before* we look at homes. Depending on the deal, my compensation may be paid by you directly, by the seller, or by the seller's broker as a credit toward what you've agreed to pay me. I'll walk you through the math so there are no surprises at closing.

Q. What's FIRPTA and could it affect my deal?

FIRPTA is the Foreign Investment in Real Property Tax Act. If the seller is a foreign person, the buyer can be required to withhold up to 15% of the purchase price for the IRS at closing — and the buyer can be personally liable for the tax if they don't. If FIRPTA may apply, we'll bring in a qualified tax professional. Most resale transactions in Pinal County don't trigger FIRPTA, but we always check.

Q. What's a CFD (Community Facilities District)?

A CFD is a special taxing district used to finance roads, sewers, parks, and other infrastructure in newer subdivisions. If a property is in a CFD, you'll see a separate line on the property tax bill. Ask before you write the offer — we can pull the detailed property tax statement and confirm the remaining balance and term.

Q. What credit score do I need?

FHA loans start around 580, conventional around 620, and the best rates kick in at 740+. If you're below 580, we'll put together a 6–12 month plan to get you ready.

Q. Can I use gift money from family for the down payment?

Yes. Most loan programs allow gifts from immediate family. The donor will need to sign a gift letter and provide bank statements showing the source. Your lender will guide the paperwork.

Q. How long does the whole process take?

From "let's start looking" to keys in hand, plan on **60–90 days**. From accepted offer to closing day, plan on **30–45 days**.

Q. Is now a good time to buy?

The best honest answer: the right time is when *you* are ready - stable income, decent savings, and a plan to stay in the home for at least 3–5 years. Trying to time the market rarely works. Time in the market does.

Q. Should I buy a new build or a resale?

Both are fine - they're different experiences. New builds in Casa Grande, Maricopa, and Eloy offer warranties and customization but often longer timelines and HOA rules. Resales give you mature landscaping, faster move-ins, and more negotiating room. **Important:** when touring a new-build community, bring me on your *first* visit. Builders' on-site reps work for the builder - I work for you.

Q. What if I lose my job during escrow?

Tell me and your lender immediately. Depending on timing, the contract gives you options - and your earnest money may still be protected. Hiding it makes it worse.

STAY ON TRACK

Your home buyer checklist

Tear this page out (or save the PDF) and check items off as you go.

Before you start looking

- [ ] Pull all three credit reports at annualcreditreport.com - free, no credit hit
- [ ] Dispute any errors on the reports
- [ ] Calculate your debt-to-income ratio
- [ ] List all monthly expenses honestly
- [ ] Decide your max comfortable monthly payment
- [ ] Save documents needed for lender (W-2s, pay stubs, bank statements, IDs)
- [ ] Get pre-approved (not pre-qualified) with at least one lender

While you're touring

- [ ] Get on a direct MLS search through Josh
- [ ] Write your "needs vs. wants" list
- [ ] Drive each finalist neighborhood at three different times
- [ ] Take photos and notes on every tour
- [ ] Check school ratings if applicable

After your offer is accepted

⚠ WIRE TRANSFER FRAUD — READ BEFORE SENDING ANY MONEY

Cyber criminals routinely hack real-estate email accounts and send fake wiring instructions that look identical to the title company's. **Always confirm wiring instructions verbally** by calling the title or escrow officer at a number you have verified independently — NEVER use a number from the email itself. Never email documents that show bank account numbers or personal ID. When in doubt, stop and call me.

- [ ] Wire earnest money to the title company **only after** verbally verifying instructions with the escrow officer on a phone number you confirmed independently
- [ ] Schedule general home inspection within 3–5 days

- [ ] Schedule any specialized inspections (termite, pool, sewer, septic)
- [ ] Review the SPDS and HOA disclosure documents
- [ ] Lock your interest rate with your lender
- [ ] Shop and bind homeowner's insurance
- [ ] Respond fast to underwriter document requests
- [ ] Set up utility transfers for closing day
- [ ] Do your final walk-through
- [ ] Bring two IDs and cleared funds to closing
- [ ] Get the keys - pop the champagne

READY WHEN YOU ARE

Your next step is easy.

You've made it through the guide. That alone puts you ahead of most first-time buyers. The next step is just a conversation - no commitment, no pressure.

Whether you're ready to start touring next weekend, or you're a year out and just want to map your finances, I'm happy to help. Reach out however you like.

Let's talk.

Josh Bernal · REALTOR® · Yost Realty Group at RE/MAX Casa Grande

CALL OR TEXT MY CELL

(480) 773-4489 Office: (520) 836-1717

EMAIL

josh@yosthomes.com

ONLINE

joshbernalrealtor.com

OFFICE

317 E. Cottonwood Lane, Suite C, Casa Grande, AZ 85122

__Josh Bernal__ — AZ Salesperson License __SA658510000__. __Yost Realty Group at RE/MAX Casa Grande__ — JDY Holdings, LLC, AZ Entity License __LC585805000__. __Designated Broker:__ Melissa K. Yost Fuentes, AZ Broker License __BR627220000__. Each RE/MAX® office is independently owned and operated.

EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITY

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