



HANDOUT PHOTO

Diane Olson, a former Winnipegger, is a go-to person for Canadians seeking advice on property in Phoenix.

# Manitobans on prowl for properties in U.S.

*Snapping up vacation, investment homes*

By Geoff Kirbyson

**M**ANITOBANS are leading the charge as Canadians snap up U.S. real estate like never before.

According to just-released figures from Chicago-based National Association of Realtors (NAR), Canadians represented 23 per cent of all international buyers of U.S. homes and condominiums in 2009, besting Mexico and the United Kingdom for three consecutive years.

Diane Olson, a former Winnipeg police officer who is now a real estate agent in Arizona, said her business out of Manitoba increased by 350 per cent from 2008 to 2009.

"Manitoba is a very savvy marketplace where the people really like a good deal and it truly shows. They've done the numbers and they know they can't build a house for that price," she said.

She said a typical house in Arizona — a 2,200-square-foot, four-bedroom bungalow, with two bathrooms and a three-car garage — sells for between \$180,000 and \$220,000. (All figures in U.S. dollars.)

"Properties are on sale for 40 to 60 per cent off the peaks (in 2007)," she said, noting buying behaviour is being driven by low-interest rates, a totally depressed housing market south of the border and millions of dollars in wealth being transferred to younger generations.

Not only are Manitobans picking up vacation homes in Arizona, Florida or California, but a significant number of them are going even further and buying a second house for investment purposes.



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Manitobans are keeping their eyes open for Arizona properties.

"The Winnipeg market has been more aggressive in purchasing multiple properties," Olson said.

Linda Russell and her husband, Tony, are two of those aggressive buyers. They built a house in Maricopa, located about 48 kilometres south of Phoenix in 2008 and bought another one nearby a year later.

She spends about three weeks down south a year while Tony averages eight or nine weeks.

Their plan is to spend their winters there once they both retire, but until then they're happy to have friends and family stay in either house, rent-free. "It seemed like a great opportunity. When the market turns itself around, we're going to sell one of them," she said, noting the second house, which they bought for \$130,000, sold for nearly \$300,000 just three years earlier.

She said while she has heard horror stories of Canadians being ripped off by contractors because they're not in

their homes to watch over the work being done, that's not a problem for them because of the growing community of Manitobans in Maricopa.

"We all talk and ask, 'Who do you use?' It helps us identify who has credibility down there," she said.

Olson said the Arizona marketing pitch is easy on the ears of Manitobans. First, there are direct flights offered by WestJet between Winnipeg and Phoenix, there are virtually no bugs, the city boasts more than 300 days per year of sunshine and the bright lights of big cities such as Las Vegas, Los Angeles or San Diego are less than a six-hour drive away. There's one more attraction that many Winnipeggers hope will change by next year.

"The Winnipeg Jets are there. You can't believe how many former Winnipeggers have season's tickets. They love it," she said.

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