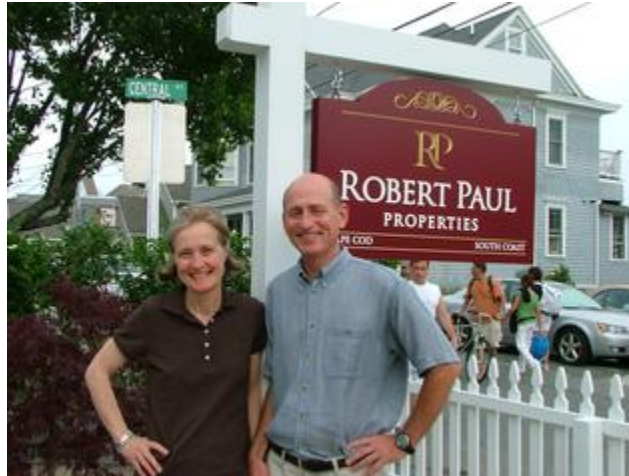


Three new companies arise in struggling Provincetown real estate market



By Pru Sowers

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PROVINCETOWN - It's arguably the worst real estate market in decades. The number of property sales on the Outer Cape reportedly fell 60 percent in the first eight months of this year compared to the same period a year ago.

So what would possess not one but three groups of people to open new local real estate companies in this market? Is it insanity or crazy like a fox?

The latter option is the unsurprising answer, according to the owners of 3 Harbors, Robert Paul Properties and Camuso Real Estate. But they all acknowledge that opening for business in an industry with little business is risky. The helpful part is that all the brokers are familiar with the Provincetown to Eastham market, having worked with different local brokerage firms before.

At Robert Paul, the owners are Paul Grover and Robert Kinlin, who sold their eponymous brokerage to GMAC 10 years ago. Both men worked with Kinlin Grover GMAC for 10 years, well past their five-year non-compete clause. But when the agency changed hands several times between corporate owners in a relatively short period of time, the two men decided to go back out on their own. Robert Paul Properties opened in February in the same office the Provincetown branch of Kinlin Grover used to occupy at 162 Commercial St. and has two other offices in Osterville and Marion.

"I've seen the [real estate] cycles. There is no question this is the worst. It's the craziest time ever to be starting a real estate company," Grover said.

But there are also opportunities. For one, recruiting good agents is easier because real estate offices are closing, causing agents to scramble for a new home. It is also possible to negotiate lower office lease rates because of the economy. And both buyers and sellers are frustrated right now, making it easier to convince them to shift to a new broker.

“I don’t want to sound foolish or cocky but I think it’s going to work,” Grover said. “It’s just a question of how long will it take.”

The three people behind 3 Harbors, Nick Norman, Anne Hartman and Philip Scholl, all worked in the Truro office of Atlantic Bay Sotheby’s International Realty. But Atlantic Bay owner Greg Russo decided to consolidate his operations in Provincetown and offered to sell the Truro office to its current principals. 3 Harbors is the newest brokerage to launch, opening for business on July 1.

“We kept most of the listings we had before. So we knew we had an inventory. That is no guarantee of income but [it] makes us optimistic,” co-owner Hartman said. “It’s not going to be what it was a few years ago and you won’t have the increase in volume and revenue like we had over a short time period. But there is still turnover. There are still people looking. And all the time there is beauty all around us [on Cape Cod]. The combination of that makes us optimistic.”

Deb Camuso worked for both Thomas D. Brown Real Estate Associates and Atlantic Bay before heading out on her own in February. At the moment she is working out of her home but expects to open an office in Truro shortly, as well as sign up agents to work for her. She said the stress of opening an office combined with the down real estate market is a challenge, but working for herself “is a heck of a lot more satisfying.”

“I have very strong views on how to run and operate a real estate business. The only way to honor that was to go out on my own and stop dancing on strings,” she said. “I can be more flexible, especially with sellers, whether it’s on the commission structure or advertising.”

The competitive push for listings and sales from the three new offices doesn’t worry at least one established broker, Bill Dougal, co-owner of Coldwell Banker Pat Shultz Real Estate in Provincetown. Brokers sell real estate, offices don’t, he said, pointing out that all the brokers involved in the new offices are already established on the Outer Cape.

“It’s not like there are new brokers here. The bigger story is what’s happening to the market and how are they going to survive,” he said.