

Austin Post-Bulletin



Part of the Arts
Alison Scott will sing at the Paramount » **A6**

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2012

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In the Spotlight
Chloe Summerfield is going strong » **B1**



On the road
Lyle/Pacelli faces Spring Grove Friday night » **B1**

Save the apples
Orchard owner fights back against nature's damage » **B6**



Joe Michaud-Scorza/jscorza@postbulletin.com

Star Grothe, 3, listens to a Curious George story with Kim Waletzke on Wednesday at the Hormel Historic Home in Austin.

Housing market improves

Staff reports and news services

A jump in sales of previously occupied homes and further gains in home construction suggest the housing recovery is gaining momentum — nationwide and in the Austin area.

Sales of previously occupied homes rose 7.8 percent in August from July to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.82 million, the National Association of Realtors said Wednesday. That's the highest level since May 2010, when sales were aided by a federal home-buying tax credit.

Austin, too, enjoyed stellar home sales in August, with 39 sales, up 2.6 percent from a year ago, and up 26 percent from July, according to the Southeast Minnesota Association of Realtors. Those sales are not seasonally adjusted.

“Through August, the market has shown further signs of stability,” said Angie Schott, SEMAR MLS president. “Continued historic low interest rates and home affordability will continue to support the stability of the market.”

Not only that, in Austin, homes are selling faster — 105 days on average so far this year, down from 121 in 2011 — and for a better price — a median of \$77,000 in August, up 7 percent from a year ago.

At the same time, builders broke ground on 2.3 percent more homes and apartments in August than July. The Commerce Department said the annual rate of construction rose to a seasonally adjusted 750,000. The increase was driven the best rate of single-family home construction since April 2010.

The pair of reports comes amid other signs of steady progress in the housing market after years of stagnation. New-home sales are up, builder confidence is at its highest level in more than six years and increases in home prices appear to be sustainable.

“The U.S. housing recovery is for real,” said Sal Guatieri, an economist at BMO Capital Markets, in a note to clients. “Great affordability, pent-up demand and strong investor interest in rental units are driving the market.”

The broader economy is also likely to benefit. When home prices rise, Americans typically feel wealthier and spend more. Consumer spending drives 70 percent of the economic growth.



Schott

Home sales

	In August	Change from August 2011
Austin:	39	Up 2.6 percent
Rochester:	182	Up 16.7 percent
Winona:	32	Up 60 percent

He's Curious, by George

By Heather Rule
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Curious George was in the house. The Hormel Historic Home, that is.

The mischievous monkey known to kids through children's books and a television show on PBS stopped by for a visit Wednesday for a Curious George Story Time.

“I hope it made the day a little more fun for the kids,” said Eric Olson, KSMQ president. “It's just a fun thing to be able to do.”

The event was presented through a collaboration of the Hormel Historic Home, Austin Public Library and KSMQ Public Television. Kids and families were able to do a little coloring, meet

George, have pictures taken with him and hear Curious George stories read by children's librarian Kari Oanes.

Curious George, and educational children's programming in general, is a huge part of PBS. Children's station was built on, Olson said, so why not promote it?

“We also are promoting the reading of the Curious George books,” Olson said. “Any way we can help kids learn and read, we're happy to help.”

George was popular with a lot of the kids, but some weren't too sure about the 5 foot, 1 inch monkey, who they're used to seeing only in pictures or through their TV screens.

“It's always fun to see how the kids are going to react to real-life Curious George,” Oanes said, who read the original Curious George book and “Curious George at the Baseball Game.”

Austin resident Barb Erstad brought her three granddaughters, ages 2½, 2 and 6 months, to see George, since they already have read the books at home. The girls were a little leery of getting up close with George.

“They like him from a distance,” Erstad said.

Heather Johnson was able to get a quick photo with George while she held her younger son, Gavin, 1½ years. Her older son Ian, 3, stayed further away and waited for the photo opp to end. Johnson said the boys like George

and watch the TV show, adding she was surprised Ian was afraid of the monkey.

One girl who couldn't seem to get enough of George was Connie Hoveland's granddaughter Clara, who is 3 years old.

“I wonder if I'll ever get her out of here,” Hoveland said. “She loves Curious George.”

Clara doesn't go to school without watching the Curious George TV show each morning.

As it was time to go for many kids, they had one last thing to do before leaving after enjoying the stories and coloring. They made it a point to greet the monkey one more time.

“Bye George!”

Dispatch collaboration strives to establish network backbone

By Heather Rule
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The city of Austin received updates from Mower County on a couple of regional cooperative ventures at a joint city/county meeting Wednesday afternoon.

The primary purpose of the 11-county dispatch collaboration is to establish a common “backbone” network, consisting of dispatch equipment and radio sites that all users can use to communicate with dispatch and each other using 800-MHz radios.

The system is used by police officers, deputies, fire and ambulance personnel, as well as other governmental agencies within the county.

The county still has decisions to make regarding the regional dispatch plan, however.

“We need to either move off this or figure out if we're going to work cooperatively with other counties,” said Craig Oscarson, county coordinator. “Do we move forward or do we stay alone?”

One question that looms is whether or not records manage-

ment is part of dispatch. It will affect whether employees would need to be retained for non-dispatch work that is done.

Austin Mayor Tom Stiehm said he doesn't see any reason to go regional because there's no benefit to it. Oscarson said there is some benefit, but the questions are there of how many people would be retained and how much money it would save.

“It sounds like the wheels are just spinning right now,” said Jerry Reinartz, Mower County Board's District 3 member.



Stiehm Reinartz

The issue will be brought forth to the Law Enforcement Center advisory committee for further analysis.

Mower County is one of four counties still in the mix for a regional human services merger. The field that once had 12 counties now consists of Mower, Dodge, Steele and Waseca. However, there's still no commitment yet to the merger, Reinartz said.

“Geographically, it'd be a pretty good group, I think,” Reinartz said.

Oscarson explained that there are three phases still to happen. Phase one will take three to four months. The county still has the option to get out of the merger

after phase one, he said.

Phase two would deal with particulars and resolve obstacles. Oscarson said officials will “roll up our sleeves” in phase two, which should take 12 to 16 months. After phase two, it would be a three- to five-year commitment.

Another point Reinartz raised was that need for these services will increase with baby boomers starting to retire. Almost half of the services go to the elderly, Oscarson said.

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Friday

61 **39**

6 a.m. 46° Noon 57° 6 p.m. 59°

Corrections

The Post-Bulletin is committed to fairness and accuracy. If you have a concern, contact Managing Editor Jay Furst at 285-7742 or furst@postbulletin.com.

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Punchline A2

“I will let my chauffeur, who is sitting in the back, answer that question for me.”

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