

Current mortgage rates, 15- and 30-year fixed, conforming

D.C. **2.94** **3.59**

Md. **2.95** **3.56**

Va. **2.89** **3.54**

SOURCE: BANKRATE.COM

GREEN ACRES

Old Virginia farmhouse gets Park Avenue treatment

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Cosmopolitan career woman and newlywed Tara Briggs moved to a 40-acre farm in Waterford, Va., in June, but unlike the character in the old TV sitcom "Green Acres" who kissed Park Avenue style goodbye, Briggs hired a designer to transform a farmhouse into a glamorous country estate.

The nearly 10,000-square-foot fieldstone house sits on a sprawling property with two ponds, streams and a barn. When Tara and her husband, Jerry, purchased the home in November, they knew they would gut the place, leaving no signs of the country interior.

It is a huge project, and designer Niki VanEch, of VanEch Studio, is guiding the couple through a process that will apply their style to fixtures, furniture, paint and finishes for six bedrooms, six and half baths and a completely new kitchen. She said it is important not to rush into decisions.

"Major renovations are like running a marathon, and often the contractor is pushing the client to make major decisions quickly so that everyone can reach the finish line," VanEch said. "However, quick decisions that are not methodically



This nearly 10,000-square-foot fieldstone house in Waterford, Va., was treated to a glamorous makeover after it was purchased by newlyweds Tara and Jerry Briggs. Designer Niki VanEch, of VanEch Studio, guided the couple through the transformation.

thought out can lead to costly mistakes and disastrous results."

With a home in a small historic town, Tara Briggs wanted to inject her tastes into the new interior without clashing with the traditional exterior. But more than anything, she wanted the home to feel glamorous.

VanEch is focusing the design process on a style called Hollywood glam. "When I think of glamour,

I think of Hollywood 1930s, lots of drama and big statements," VanEch said.

So far, Briggs has replaced brass light fixtures with crystal chandeliers. "I just love crystal," she said. "It's like jewelry."

The kitchen and master bathroom are going to make the boldest statements. "From my first meeting with Tara, I knew that bringing the right balance of sparkle, sheen and



COURTESY PHOTOS

the one room where we deviated from the color palette, and it wasn't initially by choice," VanEch said. The vanity that was delivered was not what was ordered and had an antique glaze finish and a beige countertop. "Rather than returning the piece, we decided to go with it," she said. "The results — a space that pops with an element of surprise."

The master bath captures the European elegance found in grand luxury hotels, with marble floors, walls and tub surround. Glitzy damask wallpaper complements a crystal chandelier that hangs in the middle of the bathroom. "My husband joked that he felt like there should be a dining table under it," Briggs said.

In an extra bedroom, Briggs unleashed her inner glamour girl. "Where else can I have purple walls?" She chose Hollywood regency-style mirrored-glass bedside tables and a zebra-like print bed cover.

When faced with decorating a large home, VanEch recommends starting with spaces used most often. "Don't sacrifice a well-thought-out design plan by filling a room with pieces that don't speak to that plan," she advised. "And take some time to live in the home to really get an understanding of how you might like to use the spaces."

Speed of home sales largely returns to normal

Area home sales slowed somewhat this summer, with 56 percent of homes going on the market in July under contract within 30 days, according to data from Metropolitan Regional Information Systems. The rate was down somewhat from May's 64 percent but falls within the 55 percent to 60 percent considered normal. The current metric shows homebuyers are still cautious, but confident enough to get back in the market, said David Howell, executive vice president of McEneaney Associates in Great Falls.

As the housing boom in Northern Virginia was peaking in May 2006, 94 percent of homes were under contract in 30 days. By May 2009, that had dropped to 23 percent as the market went from "irrational exuberance to irrational pessimism," Howell said. Howell tracks Northern Virginia, Loudoun County, Montgomery County and the District and said all four jurisdictions have seen this rate return to normal. — Dean Bartoli Smith

Cutting-edge countertops give kitchens a new wow factor

By Susan Wittman
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Cutting-edge technology and stone production techniques are enabling manufacturers to thinly slice semiprecious stone and create mineral-embedded quartz for use in luminous countertops with a resounding wow factor.

The Spanish firm Cosentino creates countertops from semiprecious stones such as amethyst, labradorite, rose quartz and jasper — some of which can be backlit for a rich, glowing effect. The countertops, available in 1.25-inch slabs, are handcrafted because of each stone's value and uniqueness, said Lorenzo Marquez, vice president of marketing. Part of the Prexury line, the counters retail for about \$385 a square foot and can be seen in the company's Sterling showroom.

With new quartz manufacturing technologies, Cosentino can integrate up to five colors into its

quartz-based Silestone. The colors and mineral effects available in Silestone countertops vary from shimmering, gold-flecked whites to an exotic granite look, and the company launches six to 12 new styles or colors yearly, Marquez said.

"The beauty of quartz is its ability to reinvent itself," he said. "It can adjust to current design trends."

Cosentino's SenSa line, which includes granite, marble and quartz, offers a water- and stain-resistant, chemically bonded coating and 15-year warranty.

New technology also allows fabricators to more efficiently turn granite slabs into countertops, mantles, bars and bathtub surrounds with fewer seams and flaws.

Euro Stone Craft in Herndon invested in technology that streamlines its slab design and production, providing more accurate quotes and ordering for customers.

The company uses digital measurement technology that



EFREN CAVAZOS/COSENTINO

Cosentino creates countertops from semiprecious stones such as amethyst, labradorite, rose quartz and jasper.

combines calibrated cameras and computer-aided design software with a computerized numeric code machine, once used solely to make precision aircraft parts.

"You program the [computer numerical control] machine with a precise digital template to cut to 1/1,000-inch accuracy," said Shawn Daghig, a partner and vice president at the firm. He said custom

countertops fit perfectly, veins match up, and seams are smooth and inconspicuous.

The process is environmentally friendly because it consumes fewer natural resources. Natural stone has flaws and diverse veining, so when cut by hand, most kitchens require two to three slabs, Daghig said.

"This technology is still in its infancy. It started just two years ago, so it's literally a cutting-edge technology," he quipped.

Euro Stone Craft also uses water-jet technology to carve curves, enabling it to add designer edges and cut round sinks or faucet holes. It recycles all of its water.

The software takes the guesswork out of matching granite or marble because people see exactly how the countertop will look, before it is cut, as a vivid image on a computer screen, Daghig said. "You're happier with it at the end of the day. You don't have to hold your breath. You get what you ordered."

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