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Should We Worry About a Housing Slowdown?

A monthly report on new residential construction came out this week, showing a big drop in housing starts (the groundbreaking phase following a building permit). Should we worry about a slowdown in home sales?

The short answer is "no." The long answer is a bit more nuanced, but in both cases, we're certainly **not** standing on the edge of the sort of cliff seen in 2008.

In the chart below, we can see the drop in Housing Starts on the far right. At face value, it was disconcerting because it was the **biggest drop** in more than a year, but that's really the extent of the bad news.

National Average Mortgage Rates



Mortgage News Daily	Rate	Change	Points
30YR Fixed	7.33%	-0.12	0.00
15YR Fixed	6.89%	-0.10	0.00
30YR FHA	6.95%	-0.10	0.00
30YR Jumbo	7.44%	-0.06	0.00
7/6 SOFR	6.81%	-0.19	0.00
30YR VA	6.97%	-0.10	0.00

Rates as of: 11/20

MBS and Treasury

	Price / Yield	Change
MBS UMBS 6.0	99.51	+0.41
10 YR Treasury	4.9403	-0.1033
30 YR Treasury	5.3324	-0.0738

Pricing as of: 11/20 5:59PM EST

Recent Housing Data

		Value	Change
Mortgage Apps	Nov 11	199.8	-2.35%
Building Permits	Oct	1.3M	-7.5%
Housing Starts	Oct	1.31M	+7.21%
New Home Sales	Sep	676K	-1.17%
Pending Home Sales	Oct	63	-4.69%
Existing Home Sales	Oct	3.99M	+0.25%
Builder Confidence	Nov	25	-13.79%

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Big drops in housing starts **happen** from time to time. And despite this particular drop, a positive trend remains intact.

On a more substantive note, building permits didn't have **nearly as bad** of a month (they fell only 2.2% compared to a 12.3% slide in housing starts). Volatility in 'starts' doesn't mean much unless it's accompanied by a similar slide in permits.

But let's **not** just assume it's random volatility and simply hope it goes away next month. Let's dive deeper so we can put our minds at ease.

Fortunately, diving deeper is pretty simple. The first red flag is the fact that the Midwest region experienced a decline that was **nearly 4 times as big** as the next closest region. That's too big to chalk up to random volatility in market data.

Indeed, it was not random! If you're from the Midwest or if you keep tabs on the **weather** across the country, you know June was a crazy month for some of the largest metro areas. Record high temperatures juxtaposed with flash floods understandably put a crimp on builders' plans to break ground.

This accounts for the **lion's share of the drama** in housing starts. In other words, if we factor out weather-affected areas, June's declines wouldn't be cause for concern.

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If blaming it on the rain isn't quite enough for you, just consider new home sales in the context of total home sales. The following chart shows that actual new sales numbers (not housing starts) are still trending **higher**. Existing home sales are trending sideways in healthy territory (more than 5 million units per year). When we put **new and existing** home sales on the same axis, we can see how they stack up against each other.



Bottom lines:

- Builders didn't meaningfully slow down their **permitting** efforts
- Groundbreaking efforts were certainly affected by the weather
- Weather caveats aside, new homes are a much smaller piece of the pie when it comes to overall home sales numbers
- More importantly, home sales numbers haven't yet been affected (the alarming data pertains solely to groundbreaking)

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While the housing news ends up being much less exciting by the time we break it down, the week wasn't a total bust in terms of drama. The most sensational news dealt with the President commenting candidly on the Fed's rate policy. This is **uncommon, to say the least**. The Fed is designed to operate independently and without regard for the preferences of lawmakers (except inasmuch as lawmakers nominate and confirm Fed officials, but we're nowhere close to a shake-up in that regard).

Trump essentially said he doesn't want the Fed to keep hiking rates. The comments made waves because they were so unconventional, but they ultimately didn't have a huge effect on markets. Lots of people would like the Fed to stop hiking rates, but the Fed's hands are tied by current economic realities. If the president tries to untie them, the fallout would likely be severe--so severe as to make it highly unlikely.

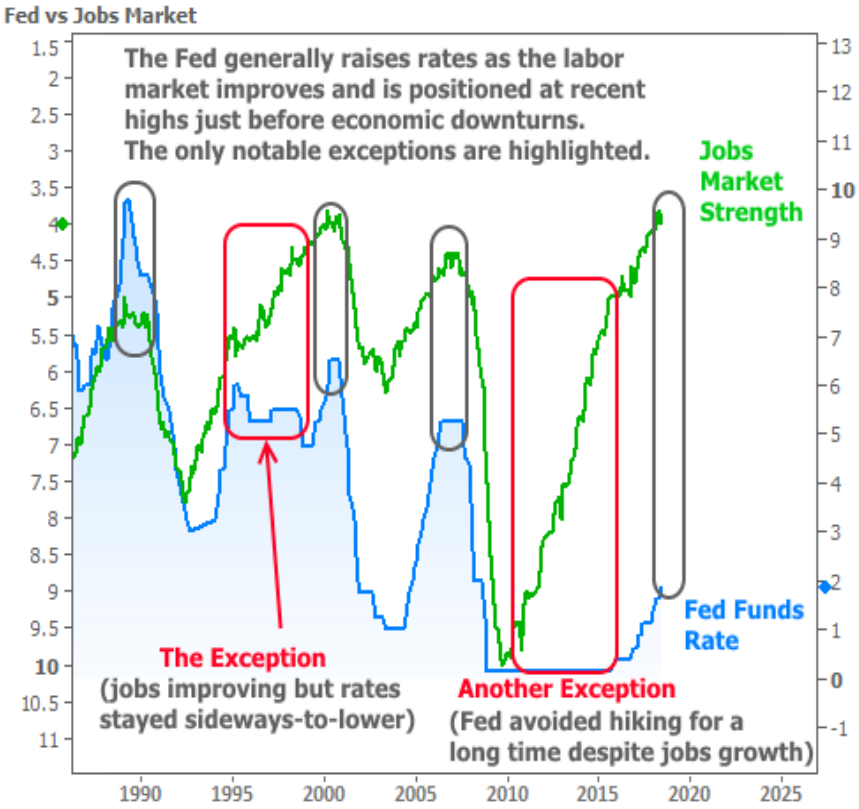
The following is not required reading, as it's a bit technical, but for those who want to understand why the Fed's hands are tied, consider the following chart. It shows the Fed Funds rate compared to the strength of the labor market and inflation. In general, the Fed can raise rates as employment and inflation **increase**. The only notable instance where the Fed kept rates steady in the face of rising employment was in the late 90's when inflation was plummeting.

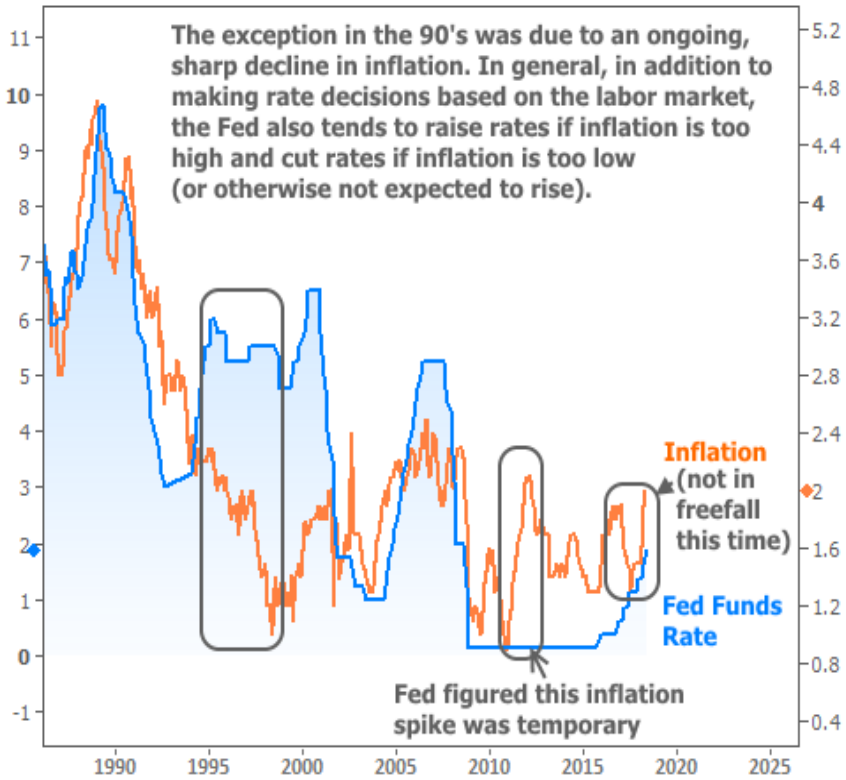
In other words, the Fed kept rates steady in order to combat falling inflation (too much is a bad thing, just ask Japan). Contrast that to the present economic cycle where inflation is at **7 year highs**, and the Fed only has one more reason to continue **raising** rates. At the very least, there is no 90's-style justification to keep rates flat in the face of 4% unemployment.

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(Note: the spike in inflation in 2011 was a byproduct of the super low inflation during the Great Recession, and thus NOT something that would force the Fed's hand. The Fed rightfully assumed that spike was temporary).

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Recent Economic Data

Date	Event	Actual	Forecast	Prior
Monday, Jul 16				
8:30AM	Jun Retail Sales (%)	+0.5	0.5	0.8
10:00AM	May Business Inventories (%)	+0.4	0.4	0.3
Tuesday, Jul 17				
9:15AM	Jun Industrial Production (%)	+0.6	0.6	-0.1
9:15AM	Jun Capacity Utilization (%)	78.0	78.3	77.9
10:00AM	Jul NAHB housing market indx	68	68	68
Wednesday, Jul 18				
7:00AM	w/e Mortgage Refinance Index	979.6		958.5
7:00AM	w/e MBA Purchase Index	247.9		261.5
8:30AM	Jun Building permits: number (ml)	1.273	1.330	1.301
8:30AM	Jun House starts mm: change (%)	-12.3		5.0
8:30AM	Jun Build permits: change mm (%)	-2.2		-4.6
8:30AM	Jun Housing starts number mm (ml)	1.173	1.320	1.350
Thursday, Jul 19				
8:30AM	Jul Philly Fed Business Index	25.7	21.5	19.9
8:30AM	w/e Jobless Claims (k)	207	216	214
10:00AM	Jun Leading index chg mm (%)	0.5	0.4	0.2
Monday, Jul 23				
10:00AM	Jun Existing home sales (ml)	5.38	5.44	5.43
10:00AM	Jun Exist. home sales % chg (%)	-0.6	0.5	-0.4
Tuesday, Jul 24				
9:00AM	May Monthly Home Price mm (%)	0.2		0.1
9:00AM	May Monthly Home Price yy (%)	6.4		6.4
Wednesday, Jul 25				
7:00AM	w/e MBA Purchase Index	245.5		247.9
7:00AM	w/e Mortgage Refinance Index	988.6		979.6
10:00AM	Jun New home sales chg mm (%)	-5.3	-2.8	6.7
10:00AM	Jun New home sales-units mm (ml)	0.631	0.670	0.689
Thursday, Jul 26				
8:30AM	Jun Durable goods (%)	1.0	3.0	-0.4
8:30AM	w/e Jobless Claims (k)	217	215	207
Friday, Jul 27				
8:30AM	Q2 GDP Advance (%)	4.1	4.1	2.0
10:00AM	Jul U Mich Sentiment Final (ip)	97.9	97.1	97.1

Event Importance:

No Stars = Insignificant
☆ Low
★ Moderate
★★ Important
★★ Very Important

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