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Rates Played Chicken With The Fed (And Lost)

Mortgage rates hit 5 month lows last week but quickly jumped to the highest levels in more than a month this week. While last week's strong jobs report certainly served as a catalyst, there's more to the story.

Fortunately, the story is fairly simple. It began in October when rates hit decades-long highs and finally began to make progress back toward lower levels. Inflation had been a pivotal component of the surge and inflation reports were starting to moderate in November and December. Simply put, a rate recovery made good sense.

In fact, lower inflation was desperately anticipated by financial markets. Interest rates, especially, had been on the defensive, waiting for a sign that the worst was over. Q4, 2022 arguably provided that sign, but there were serious questions to be answered about what would come next for rates.

The market began answering those questions in January. Mortgage rates and popular benchmarks like the 10yr Treasury yield had fallen an entire percentage point, but then paused to wait for the green light to drop some more.

Rates were right to be hesitant. By falling as much as they had, they were already playing a dangerous game of chicken with the Federal Reserve. The Fed controls and sets the shortest-term interest rates in an effort to control inflation. The Fed Funds Rate doesn't directly dictate mortgage rates, but changes in the Fed's rate outlook definitely impact mortgage rates. Conversely, a big enough drop in mortgage rates can carry implications for inflation (the thing the Fed is trying to fight by raising short-term rates).

Here's where that game of chicken comes in. The market had been betting that the Fed would be forced to cut short-term rates by the end of 2023 even though Fed members had repeatedly said rates wouldn't top out for a few more months at minimum and then remain at the ceiling for a year or two. The market thought the Fed was bluffing or wrong. Either way, those defiant expectations helped mortgage rates hit 5 month lows last week.

Then the jobs report happened (last Friday). It also happened 2 days after the Fed's latest policy announcement. Markets began to panic. What would the Fed have done if it knew the jobs report would be so strong? Panic was amplified by the fact that Fed Chair Powell was scheduled for an informal Q&A the following Tuesday (February 7th) at the Economics Club of D.C. (a

National Average Mortgage Rates

	Rate	Change	Points
Mortgage News Daily			
30 Yr. Fixed	6.86%	-0.05	0.00
15 Yr. Fixed	6.31%	-0.02	0.00
30 Yr. FHA	6.32%	-0.06	0.00
30 Yr. Jumbo	7.04%	-0.03	0.00
5/1 ARM	6.53%	-0.02	0.00
Freddie Mac			
30 Yr. Fixed	6.78%	-0.08	0.00
15 Yr. Fixed	6.07%	-0.09	0.00

Rates as of: 7/26

Market Data

	Price / Yield	Change
MBS UMBS 5.5	99.68	+0.27
MBS GNMA 5.5	99.98	+0.13
10 YR Treasury	4.1958	-0.0474
30 YR Treasury	4.4523	-0.0305

Pricing as of: 7/26 5:59PM EST

Recent Housing Data

		Value	Change
Mortgage Apps	Jul 10	206.1	-0.19%
Building Permits	Mar	1.46M	-3.95%
Housing Starts	Mar	1.32M	-13.15%
New Home Sales	Mar	693K	+4.68%
Pending Home Sales	Feb	75.6	+1.75%
Existing Home Sales	Feb	3.97M	-0.75%
Builder Confidence	Mar	51	+6.25%

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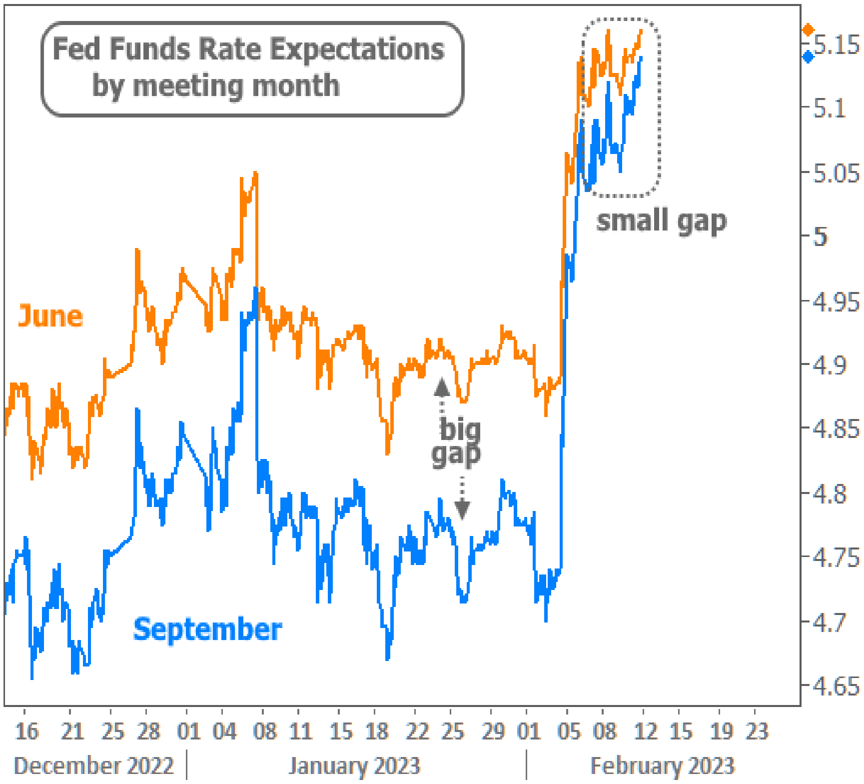
venue that would surely generate relevant questions).

Even before Powell took the stage, the market was already rethinking its game of chicken. Whereas Septembers Fed Funds Rate had consistently been expected to be lower than June's, traders were quickly beginning to believe it would be unchanged. The following chart shows those expectations over time, both for the June and September Fed meetings. Note the gap that had existed up until this week.



By the time Powell spoke on Tuesday, the market was already admitting defeat. All Powell had to do was say that last week's jobs report is exactly the sort of thing the Fed has in mind when it says inflation may be more persistent than the market thinks and that rates may need to stay higher, longer than the market things.

As the week progressed, additional Fed speakers joined in with similar messages. The net effect has been a quick move off the recent lows for longer-term rates. They're now up to the highest levels in more than a month.

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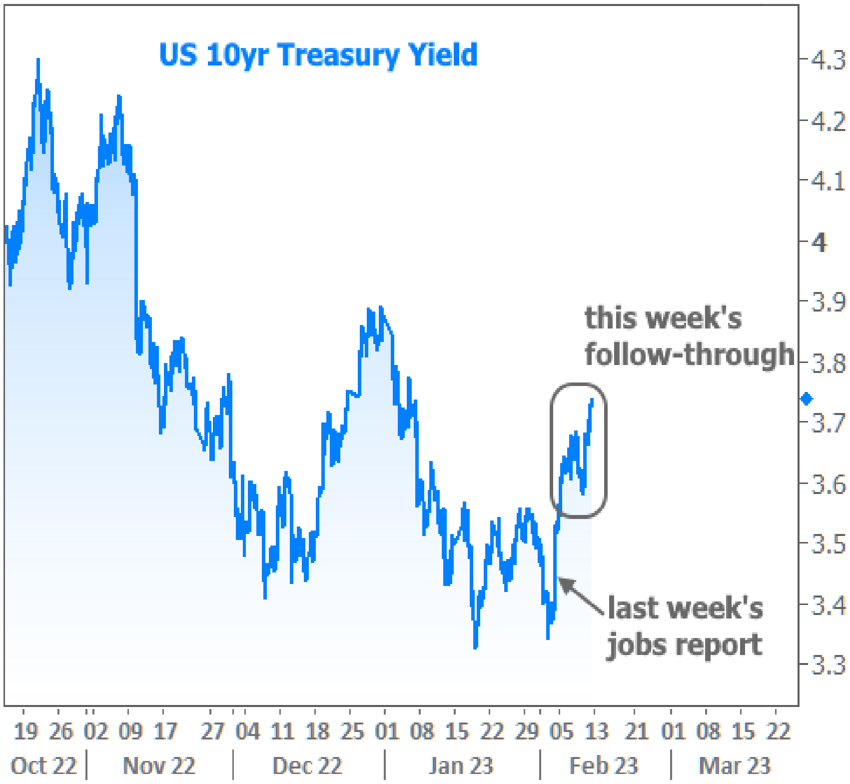

Momentum in mortgage rates has been similar with the average lender up roughly half a percentage point since last Thursday. This has implications for purchase mortgage demand based on the typical correlation seen in the following chart. Specifically, the drop in rates helped bring prospective buyers off the sidelines. It wouldn't be a surprise to see this week's rate spike take a toll on the momentum.

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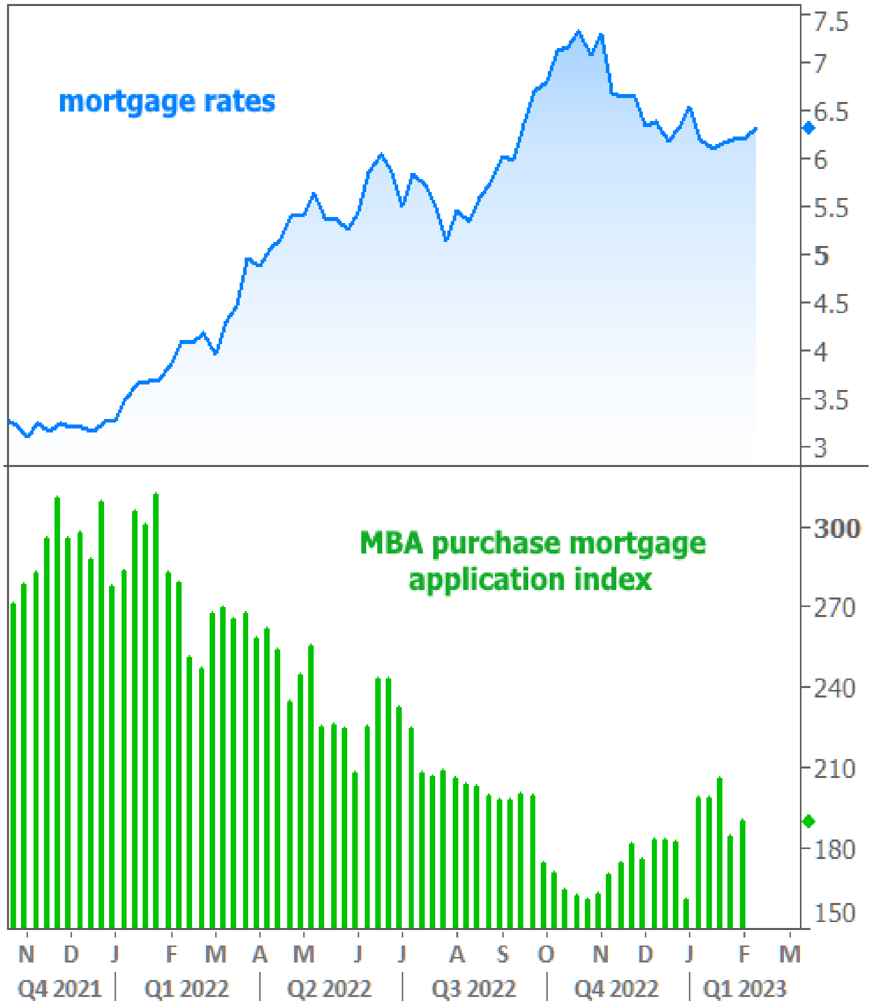

While the current week has been one of correction and reversal, it's important to know that it doesn't carry an implication for the next move. This week was about the market catching up to the Fed's messaging and giving up a bit of the exuberance it may have felt after identifying what we all hope will prove to be a very long-term top in rates last fall.

Even then, this week's move required economic data to serve as a catalyst. Heading into the coming week, we can expect more of the same. Tuesday's Consumer Price Index (CPI) is the only economic report that could be argued to be more important than last week's jobs report. If inflation falls more than expected, rates should be able to recover back into the recent range. But if inflation comes in much hotter than expected, we could be in for another panicked move higher.

How high? It would take more than one CPI report to get mortgage rates back to last year's long-term highs, but if other economic data was similarly strong, it could only take a week or two in the most dire scenarios.

If the jobs report was so strong, should we worry about other data singing a similar tune? Yes and no. We should be sensitive to the possibility that the economic data measured by government agencies will be different than our individual perceptions of the economy. So many of the answers depend on where you look. For instance, consider another report set to come out on Tuesday: Small Business Optimism.

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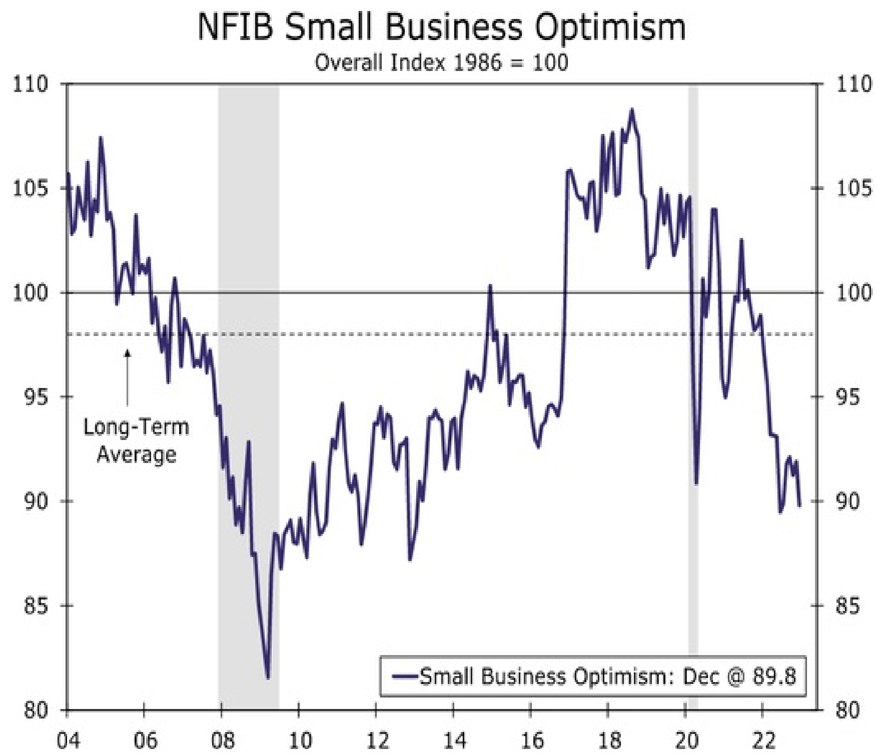

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Recent Economic Data

Date	Event	Actual	Forecast	Prior
Tuesday, Feb 07				
8:30AM	Dec Trade Gap (bl)	-67.4	-68.5	-61.5
12:30PM	Powell at Economic Club			
1:00PM	3-Yr Note Auction (bl)	40		
3:00PM	Dec Consumer credit (bl)	+11.56	25.00	27.96
Wednesday, Feb 08				
7:00AM	w/e MBA Purchase Index	190.0		184.3
7:00AM	w/e MBA Refi Index	549.3		466.6
10:00AM	Dec Wholesale inventories mm (%)	0.1	0.1	0.1
Thursday, Feb 09				
8:30AM	w/e Jobless Claims (k)	196	190	183
8:30AM	w/e Continued Claims (ml)	1.688	1.658	1.655
Friday, Feb 10				
10:00AM	Feb 1yr Inflation Outlook (%)	4.2		3.9
10:00AM	Feb 5yr Inflation Outlook (%)	2.9		2.9
10:00AM	Feb Consumer Sentiment	66.4	65.0	64.9
Tuesday, Feb 14				

Event Importance:

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

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Date	Event	Actual	Forecast	Prior
8:30AM	Jan y/y CORE CPI (%)	5.6	5.5	5.7
8:30AM	Jan m/m CORE CPI (%)	0.4	0.4	0.3
Wednesday, Feb 15				
7:00AM	w/e MBA Purchase Index	179.6		190.0
7:00AM	w/e MBA Refi Index	480.5		549.3
8:30AM	Jan Retail Sales (%)	3.0	1.8	-1.1
8:30AM	Feb NY Fed Manufacturing	-5.80	-18.00	-32.90
9:15AM	Jan Industrial Production (%)	0.0	0.5	-0.7
10:00AM	Feb NAHB housing market indx	42	37	35
10:00AM	Dec Business Inventories (%)	0.3	0.3	0.4
Thursday, Feb 16				
8:30AM	Jan Core Producer Prices YY (%)	5.4	4.9	5.5
8:30AM	Jan Producer Prices (%)	0.7	0.4	-0.5
8:30AM	Jan House starts mm: change (%)	-4.5		-1.4
8:30AM	Feb Philly Fed Business Index	-24.3	-7.4	-8.9
8:30AM	w/e Jobless Claims (k)	194	200	196
Friday, Feb 17				
10:00AM	Jan Leading index chg mm (%)	-0.3	-0.3	-0.8
Wednesday, Apr 12				
1:00PM	10-yr Note Auction (bl)	32		
Thursday, Apr 13				
1:00PM	30-Yr Bond Auction (bl)	18		
Wednesday, Apr 19				
1:00PM	20-Yr Bond Auction (bl)	12		

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About Me

I am proud to say that I am one of the top producing mortgage brokers in the country, ranking in the top 20 nationally by Scotsman Guide for each of the past 5-years, the top producing mortgage broker for Utah volume 2019-2023, and the top producing VA mortgage broker in 2024. I have personally closed over 12,000 mortgage loans for $4 billion in my 22-year career. In 2023, I was ranked #6 nationally by Scotsman Guide Top Mortgage Brokers, closing 400 loans for $185 million, while guiding my clients through the entire loan process.

Since I began in this industry over 20-year ago, my focus has always been on improving systems and increasing efficiencies to drive down the cost of a mortgage loan for the consumer. I am obsessed with originating mortgage loans and helping consumers achieve their home financing goals in expeditious fashion. I adopt a "do whatever it takes" and "do it now" mentality until the job is done and my clients are completely satisfied.

My customer experience pillars are 1) An Extremely Low Price, 2) Fast Closing Time (~18 day average), 3) Instant Response and 4) Extreme Efficiency. My success in the mortgage field is attributable to my high level of integrity, reliability, efficiency, and obsession with client service. I look forward to helping you with any mortgage questions, and helping you obtain some of the very lowest mortgage rates available in the market.

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