

Location, Location, Location – How to Decide Where to Live

Finding your dream home is often easier than finding your dream neighborhood. Some homebuyers find the "perfect" home, then immediately put on their rose-colored glasses, tuning out such factors as nearby congestion (for example, if a local business causes perpetual traffic jams on the street); proximity to higher-crime areas or "seedy" hangouts; failing to calculate the commute time to your new job (it could be much longer than you think if you don't test it during peak rush hour times); or failing to calculate the distance to your children's new schools. Perhaps you've got your eye on a fabulous downtown loft ... only to discover, once you've moved in, that a "quick trip" to the grocery store means a 20-minute drive to the suburbs, and that the nearest gas station is nowhere near your new home

Before you say "No location is perfect," some of us do come mighty close. And it's not always due to sheer luck. You can narrow down your list of perspective new neighborhoods by creating a checklist for yourself. While you won't always find the perfect home in the perfect neighborhood that satisfies every preference on your list, you can through a process of elimination find a home in a neighborhood that meets most of your criteria. In other words, with a little homework, you can find something you and your family can live with. While we don't stop to consider it, such factors as commute time to work and distance to the nearest grocery store can make a considerable difference in our overall quality of life. Wouldn't you like to gain an additional 30 minutes each day to spend with your family? Or, perhaps, know that if you suddenly run out of milk at 9 p.m., that you can take a five-minute drive down the street to the local market? Today's on-the-go lifestyles demand "yes" to both questions.

Consider the following criteria when compiling



your own personal checklist for a prospective neighborhood:

- How near is your new place of employment? Distance is everything -- even if you don't think so right now. A short commute buys you more time with your family, the ability to go home for lunch if you'd like, to wake up later and leave the office later without fear of traffic tie-ups if you linger, and in general, a less stressful lifestyle. Even if the physical distance between your prospective new home and your job doesn't seem great, make sure you try it during peak rush hour times. Appearances are often deceiving.
- If you're a frequent churchgoer -- whether on Sundays or for various activities throughout the week -- how close are you to your church? Driving a far distance back and forth each Sunday can eat up a significant portion of your weekend.
- How close are you to your children's day care provider, if you use one? Would you have to "back track," driving in the opposite direction of your workplace to drop your child off? If the answer is yes, don't forget -- that means you'll have an additional distance to drive after work, when being late for the day care's established pick-up time could cost you fees.
- How close are you to your children's school or schools? If one child's school is close and the other isn't, will this create a problem for you and your spouse? Would you have any choice as to what school your children attend? Charter schools are gaining in popularity; this could represent a solu-

tion to your dilemma. Ask your Realtor for local school data not only in relation to proximity, but also in terms of standardized test scores compared to both statewide and national averages.

- Do you have access to public transportation? This is especially important for anyone in your home who doesn't drive, including young teens and some senior citizens. If public transportation is both safe and reliable, you could opt to move into a home a bit further away from your job than you would have chosen had public transportation not been available.

- How close are you to medical services? To a police station? Fire department? Proximity to medical care is particularly important for the increasing percentage of our baby-boomer population caring for their aging parents and relatives.

- Study the other homes on the street. How well do neighbors keep up with their property? How many other homes are for sale on the street? Are those homes ridden with un-kept lawns, and is the property being well-maintained even in the absence of an owner? Drive around the block. Is that same degree of care taken by other homeowners living on surrounding streets, or is there a night-and-day difference? Does the atmosphere feel different to you, perhaps even a bit unsafe? Trust your instincts. Are there any neighborhood crime watch organizations in the area? How well are local public facilities maintained?

- What is the tax rate for the area? Find out the effective tax rate, which is the annual tax bill divided by the value of the home? And which municipal services are available?

- Are there any active neighborhood organizations working to maintain and improve the area?

- If you choose to move into the neighborhood, is there a homeowners' association in which your membership is mandatory? Homeowners have mixed feelings about such associations. While they certainly help to maintain the quality of the neighborhood and its property values, and maintain its safety as well, they do require membership fees. Find out what they are -- you might be surprised.

- Will you face any deed restrictions? What are they, and how sternly are they enforced?

Indeed, it's true that the old saying, "Location, location, location" really is crucial to the future happiness of any homeowner. So before you slide on those rose-colored glasses and close the deal, check out that neighborhood. Come back during the evening hours. Find out who frequents the neighborhood and when. Some neighborhoods have multiple personalities and attract a different crowd at night. Talk to your Realtor, then talk to prospective neighbors. Drive around, and do your own research. Then, and only then, can you make an informed decision about the best neighborhood for you.