

What realty agents won't tell you, because they can't

Fair-housing laws prevent agents from talking about neighborhood demographics, and they often don't want to discuss other details, such as crime stats. Luckily, the Web picks up where agents leave off.

By Amy Hoak, MarketWatch



Steve Roddel was walking through a house in Fort Wayne, Ind., when he wondered aloud whether there were any sex offenders living in the neighborhood.

Instead of commenting on her own, the real estate agent showing the home quickly pulled out her cell phone, connected to its Web browser and brought up [Family Watchdog](#), a national sex-offender-registry Web site. Little did she know that she was standing with the site's founder and CEO.

A real estate agent can be a wealth of information about a house. So a homebuyer who asks what crime is like in the neighborhood might be surprised when the agent defers the question, directing a client to the Web or local police instead.

"The Realtor will be the one that has the most contact from beginning to end. Because of that accessibility, the consumer feels that they can give them all the information that they need," said Alex Chaparro, the president of the Chicago Association of Realtors.

But there are some pieces of information that an agent simply can't speak about due to fair-housing laws, including demographic statistics. And they often prefer to leave some characteristics, such as the quality of the school district or crime stats, answered by other sources.

The conservative approach is often taken in order to avoid a lawsuit popping up in response to frank neighborhood talk, said Ralph Holmen, an associate general counsel of the National Association of Realtors. Agents are forbidden from giving information that could be considered "steering," directing a client toward or away from a particular property in a discriminatory manner.

Some of this information will make or break a decision to buy. The quality of school systems, for example, has long been of importance to home-buying families. Fortunately, there are a variety of sources buyers can use to get at the information on their own.

Checking on the schools

Unless a realty agent has hard data at his or her fingertips, the agent may decline to answer school-district questions. Even if the agent is willing to share some information, a prospective buyer might want to do additional fact-finding before deciding on a home or which neighborhoods to consider.

A national database of school demographic information can be found on the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) Web site. Click on the "School, College, & Library Search" tab at the top in order to view data including a particular school's student-to-teacher ratio or enrollment by race and ethnicity.

For a snapshot of academic performance and to compare schools, a prospective homeowner might browse the [School Matters](#) Web site, a service of Standard & Poor's.

"People who are really attracted to (School Matters) are people who are moving," said Susan Shafer, the director of marketing and communications for Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services. "It's a good starting point," she said, but it still isn't a substitute for an actual tour.

Another site, [GreatSchools](#), offers similar tools. Some school districts and state departments also post information online. It might be worthwhile to look at an individual school district's site, especially for large systems.

Crime matters

Roddel's Family Watchdog Web site allows users to enter a street address and pull up a map of the area that plots out where sex offenders live. Click on one of the squares that indicate an offender's home, and often an address and a photo are available to view.

Information is updated at least once a day and is culled from state registries, Roddel said.

The idea for the site came about a year and a half ago, after 9-year-old Jessica Lunsford was assaulted and killed by a convicted sex offender in central Florida in 2005, he said.

"(Real estate agents) tell me that their buyers tell them where they do and don't want to look for houses based on the density of sex offenders (in the neighborhood)," Roddel said.

He hopes to create another tool that will help people learn about other neighborhood crimes. In Chicago, there already is such a site: [ChicagoCrime.org](#), which allows visitors to search for crimes by city block.

For now, he suggests that people scout out the neighborhood the old-fashioned way. "Talk to the police department and see if they've got any statistics," Roddel said.

Judging the environment

Another issue that comes up occasionally in a housing search is the environmental characteristics of a neighborhood, said Holmen, of the National Association of Realtors. The association typically advises members not to make judgment calls on the health of an area and to leave that to experts.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's [Web site](#) has a tool that allows visitors to search a community by ZIP code for environmental facts about the area, including pollution statistics, the location of hazardous-waste sites and information about the area's watershed.

Another site dedicated to helping the public retrieve information about local environmental health is [Scorecard](#), which generates a pollution report card at the county level, giving information on such topics as air and water quality.

Learning the demographics

If agents don't shy away from any other question, they most likely will when it comes to those regarding demographics -- and for good reason. Fair-housing laws forbid issues of race or ethnicity to be a consideration in the minds of real estate agents, who mustn't steer a client toward or away from a particular area based on the neighborhood's makeup.

When Anne Kennedy, an agent in Austin, Texas, turns down a question about neighborhood demographics, clients "completely understand," she said. She suggests searching the U.S. Census Bureau's Web site for statistics about an area's demographics; the bureau's [Quick Facts page](#) breaks down the information easily, by city and county.

"That would also show general socio-economic data," she said.

Walking the neighborhood

Finally, even though there's a wealth of information online, there are some questions best answered by walking around the area and making a note of your observations.

For example, in Chicago, sometimes a client will ask what parking is like on a particular block, Chaparro said. If the showing is at 10 in the morning, when many cars are off the street because their owners are at work, he doesn't have an answer to give them.

Several trips past the home at various points of the day, noting whether there are special parking restrictions marked on the street, will probably provide a more informed answer.