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House-Hunting Homework Schools, Crime, Transit: A Wealth Of Local Detail Awaits

By Allan Lengel

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Before buying a house in Bethesda last month, Susan Fiorella tapped away on her keyboard. She researched schools. She checked crime statistics. She even solicited opinions about neighborhoods from an e-mail group for urban moms and dads.

"A lot of people don't need to be as rigorous to develop this kind of comfort level," said Fiorella, a strategist for a health-care provider and the mother of two young children. "We did exhaustive research; that's our personality."

In an era when Googling has become a national pastime, schools, police departments, businesses and governments are making it easier to research neighborhoods, lessening the chances of buyer's remorse.

Many school Web sites, for example, post test scores and write about special offerings such as magnet programs. Some police departments provide statistics on crime in specific areas. Some county governments post locations of parks and neighborhood master plans. A U.S. government Web site even pinpoints locations of sex offenders, down to a specific block.

"I recommend to all my purchasers: Familiarize yourself with the neighborhood before you write the offer," said Judi Seiden, an associate broker for Prudential Carruthers Realtors on Capitol Hill.

Said Joel Abalos, an agent at Keller Williams Realty of Fairfax Gateway in Fairfax: "You don't want to sell a house to somebody and two weeks after closing they find out there's a rapist next door."

In the BTI era -- Before the Internet -- would-be buyers or their real estate agents often ran around to gather information packets from schools, libraries and government offices. The Web has changed that.

"It's made it much easier," said Robyn Burdett, an agent with Re/Max Allegiance in Fairfax. "It's taken away a lot of the legwork, and I want to say the unknown is gone."

She said, "Just going to the Metro Web site, my client can figure out the bus schedule for the park-and-ride and how they all connect and how long they take."

Still, when a Web site won't quite satisfy, she recommends finding out the old-fashioned way. To find out more about a school, for example, she sometimes suggests that clients talk with the principal or call another parent to ask questions.

"I've also had clients walk their kids through the school," she said.

One of her clients, Jason Lynch, an ecologist with the Environmental Protection Agency, is living with relatives in the Washington area while he researches homes and neighborhoods. In the meantime, his wife and two daughters, ages 4 and 7, are back home in Illinois.

Besides researching schools on the Web, he said, he has been experimenting with commutes from Northern Virginia to the District.

As for crime prevalence, he said, he is relying on what his relatives tell him. "My brother-in-law has lived in Reston for about 25 years," he said.

Real estate agents say federal fair-housing laws limit what they can say about a school district or neighborhood, particularly when it comes to race and socioeconomic indicators.

Many simply play it safe by referring clients to Web sites or suggesting other ways to assuage concerns. Besides, agents say, they fear giving out bad information.

"I try to give them as much information as possible by giving them the Web sites, locations and the Montgomery Board of Education phone numbers, and I tell them they should do their homework," said Kris Feldman of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Bethesda.

Seiden said she sometime tells clients to visit a block "in the morning when people go to work and in the evening when they're coming home -- and feel free to have a conversation. For the most part, everyone is very forthcoming."

She added: "For a third check, go late in the evening and check out the activity and see how comfortable you feel, acknowledging that anything new is going to be strange. If they come back and say, 'Gee I hate it,' it's not the house for them."

Abalos, the Fairfax County real estate agent, warned that visits alone sometimes give an incomplete picture.

"Sometimes people think, driving at night, they can tell if there's a high crime rate," he said. "I don't think it's accurate. It's better to call the police and check statistics."

Some police department Web sites, including those for the District and Prince George's County, provide a breakdown of crime statistics by neighborhood, often referred to as crime mapping. Some other departments that don't, such as Arlington's, encourage prospective buyers to contact them.

"What we do is put them through to our district office, whatever district they're moving into," said John Lisle, a spokesman for the Arlington County Police Department. "We get a lot of requests. The district office pulls up crime statistics for a certain period to give them an idea what crime has been like in the area."

Neighborhood e-mail lists or Web sites for communities such as Mount Pleasant in Northwest Washington (<http://mtpleasantdc.org>) are forums to discuss neighborhood issues, activities and crime. They can give prospective buyers a feel for the area.

For many buyers with children, the bulk of the research focuses on schools. Some free Web sites rank schools nationally. And schools themselves normally provide a wealth of information on their sites, in some cases the number of incidents involving fights or guns.

According to the Montgomery County school system's Web site, for instance, Ashburton Elementary School on Lone Oak Drive in Bethesda had 570 students in the 2006-07 school year, of whom 56.1 percent were white, 12.8 percent Hispanic, 17.5 percent Asian and 13.5 percent African American. The ratio of students to instructional

staff was 9.7 to 1. Kindergarten classes averaged 23.7 students; for grades 4 and 5, average class size was 22.

The Washington Post's Local Explorer service, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/localexplorer>, provides neighborhood-driven local news as well as mapping information about home sales, businesses, schools and crime.

Other commercial Web sites such as Homefair.com provide not only school information but also profiles of cities. Typing a Zip code brings up neighborhood data breaking down the population into categories: male and female; married, divorced and widowed; average household income; ethnic and racial background; and education level. The site also provides crime statistics and average home sale prices.

Jean Lin, a lawyer who moved from Brooklyn to Bethesda with her husband, also a lawyer, focused her Internet research on schools, comparing two or three districts. She checked math and English scores and other data.

She said she's not even sure her kids, now 1 and 3 years old, will ever attend the high schools in the areas she examined. However, she said, "We also knew from our limited experience there's a correlation between good school districts and how well a house keeps its value."

For some parents, knowing whether there's a sex offender in the neighborhood is important, real estate agents said.

One of the better Web sites for that is the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Registry, run by the U.S. Justice Department and named after a woman who was killed by a convicted offender. Typing in a Zip code produces a list of offenders, with photos and locations.

For example, in the 20015 Zip code in upper Northwest Washington, two sex offenders were listed: one 66 years old, the other 75. The victims of both were children. In Chantilly, Zip code 20152 had two registered sex offenders: a 38-year-old man convicted of taking indecent liberties with a child and a 59-year-old man convicted of third-degree sexual assault.

Ron Sitrin, a real estate agent for Long & Foster in Friendship Heights, also warned that prospective buyers should check the government master plan for a neighborhood. Some governments, such as Montgomery and Fairfax counties, post them on their Web sites.

The key, he said, is to avoid unwelcome surprises. "You want to make sure you're not buying on a single-lane road that's getting ready to double in size."