Selling? Keep pets in mind

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For The Times
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Pets care more about people and dinner than property value, but don't worry. We've got great tips on how to have a "pet-fabulous house" that will also attract buyers when you're ready to sell.

Your first best strategy toward finding that sweet common ground with pets and property is to buy a pet-friendly house.

Andrew Coe, associate broker with Exit Leon Crawford Realty in Huntsville, recommends a country style ranch with wrap-around porch because the porch allows pets to get out of the sun and the one-floor layout offers easier maintenance. Room areas can be easily gated if you want to keep animals in certain areas of the house.

Karen Borden, Realtor with Keller Williams Realty, also in Huntsville, says, if you're like most pet owners, you'll want a fenced-in yard, easy access to the backyard, and indoor areas like a utility room or bathroom to restrict a pet's access or provide a "private place" for a litter box. Many buyers also seek out houses on less-trafficked streets as a safety measure.

With day-to-day operations and the prospect of a future sale, Coe and Borden strongly agree carpeting is a big no-no.

"When it comes to pet-friendly flooring, carpets tend to be the least pet friendly," he says. "This is because they can hold pet hair and pet odors, and can be difficult to keep clean when accidents occur or when dirty pets roll around on the carpets. Wood floors can get scratched when pets with claws run around on the floors. Laminate, vinyl and tile tend to be a little more pet friendly inside the home and would require less upkeep to keep clean."

Borden says laminate and tile flooring are good, but wooden floors sell the best. Yes, she said wooden flooring can work with pets if you go with today's popular distressed flooring that makes it harder to see scratches or use latest wood sealing products for added protection.

Also, if there are "accidents," both Coe and Borden advise you be prompt about the cleanup to avoid stains and smells.

Melissa Horne, associate veterinarian with the Animal Care Clinic in Huntsville, advises pet destructive behavior can be easily fixed by doggy proofing a house and supervision.

"For the dogs that chew on rugs and furniture, supervision works well, as well as providing the pet with appropriate chew items as chewing is normal dog behavior," Horne says. "Crate training a dog is a great way to prevent some of these problems."

If the problem continues, take your fuzzy buddy to a vet for more specific advice or to check for a medical problem. If you've got cats, you should have at least one litter box per cat. They may not like their litter, so consult the vet for recommendations. To lessen scratching issues, provide a scratching post, clip nails or spray them with water when caught in the act. If you're not into declawing, Horne says a new product called "Soft Paws," provides soft plastic tips that can be glued onto claws.

If you're ready to sell the house, anticipate repairing damaged floors, doors, trim or screens as would any homeowner, Coe says. Replace all carpeting, refresh flower and shrub beds outside the house and repair any yard areas that may have been affected by pets.

Coe has encountered those buyer-turnoff issues with pets first-hand, including odors, chewed up trim work, stained carpets and dug-up yards. Borden adds litter box odors and soiled areas like baseboards and floors to the list of concerns.

The good news here is both Coe and Borden also agree you shouldn't have to pay more for improvements if you handle daily maintenance with cleanliness and repairs.

"Sellers need to be conscious of the fact that everyone looking at their home is not going to be in love with their pet," he says. "Ideally, buyers would never know a pet was in the home. Buyers with pets that need to be accommodated may need help envisioning how that can take place when looking at different properties."

Borden says pets should be crated, kept in a utility room or removed from the house when possible when you've got an appointment for a showing. Yes, it avoids distractions such as barking or meowing, but it also ensures everyone's safety, including the pets.

"I have heard horror stories where showing agents and buyers have inadvertently left doors open and pets have gotten out only to be hurt, killed or never found," she says. "Safety is a must for the pet and there are non-animal lovers out there who don't want to be jumped on or worried by a pet. If the seller has dogs that are outside when owners are gone, don't let them have free run of the yard while you are trying to sell your house. Invest in a large pen - again for safety reasons. Also, buyers want to see yards. If there are dogs out there, they may not go in the yard, and, again, gates left open is a big safety issue for the pet."

Horne says some pet owners have a "dog room" or "cat room" with easily cleanable and/or scratch resistant flooring. Many of them have plush bedding for dogs and ledges for cats.

If you installed fencing for your pets that can be a drawing card for buyers also looking for a safe pet area. Other attractors can include pet access doors and a floor plan that easily adapts to closing off certain areas to pets if desired.

If you're wondering whether the effort is worth the price to attract pet-owning buyers then know that Coe estimates they make up half of his clients. But he and Borden warn that any buyer would be turned off by a smelly or poorly-maintained house, which could be a deal breaker in today's more challenging market.

To promote a better sale, both Coe and Borden recommend you use a pet-friendly real estate agent.

"A listing agent who is attempting to list a home for a seller that has pets can really turn off the seller by stating things such as 'You have to put your pet outside from now on' or 'You need to put your pet with a family member,'" says Borden, who is also a pet lover. "Most of the time, these pets are family members and owners are not fond of throwing them out the door. And, when showing a home with pets, never talk negatively to the buyer if the listing says 'Don't let the dog or cat out.' In fact, a buyers' agent needs to be very cognizant of the pets in the home as far as monitoring them so they don't get out of the house."

Overall, Horne says supervision is the best line of defense when it comes to having a pet-fabulous house - she's had to surgically remove clothing swallowed by dogs. Keep them away from items toxic to them, including sugar free gum with the compound xylitol, chocolate, onions, grapes and raisins. Don't leave prescription drugs within their reach because Horne has seen dogs get into them.