

## FIGURING OUT SQUARE FOOTAGE

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In a recent article, a nationally syndicated real estate columnist answered a question from a buyer about square footage that was, and I won't gloss this over, bungled. While the response may have been appropriate in another part of the country, it wasn't satisfactory for Connecticut.

In the question presented, the purchasers of a home believed that the home's square footage was 2,308, as that was what the listing report indicated. The town, however, listed the home's square footage as 2,042. The purchasers believed they had been royally gypped out of 266 square feet and that this loss would clearly be reflected in the sales price if they ever resold the home. The columnist responded that the "mistake" lay with the seller and the listing agent.

First, and most importantly, to the best of my knowledge there is no universal standard for measuring square footage. While there are standards used in the secondary mortgage market, there is no overall legal definition. In fact, not only may different departments within a town or county government calculate square footage differently, different areas of the country may measure it differently. Some calculations may include a three-season porch or a basement as living area and some may calculate the square footage in a foyer that is open to the second level's ceiling as part of the second floor living area. The "missing" 266 square feet in the columnist's example could possibly be found in the considerations and the calculations of the measurer.

Secondly, in Connecticut there are many sources from which one may ask and receive an estimate of square footage. Therefore, to ask for *the* square footage may result in different answers from the different sources, i.e., the Assessor, an appraiser, and the owner. Furthermore, each source may determine the square footage figure independently and each may use that figure for different purposes.

Realtors® routinely acquire information from a property's street card (also known as a field card) in the town's Assessor's office. Three things should be said about the Assessor's records – they may not be correct, there is no obligation for the Assessor to verify and update the information, and if no one challenges the Assessor's information, it remains. A buyer needs to know that a street card's information is generally as current as the last assessment, so it follows that any improvements to or deletions from the property since the last assessment may not be reflected on the street card. Any improvements to or deletions from a property can impact square footage.

Connecticut real estate licensees are taught not to operate outside the scope of their services and are cautioned not to make statements about facts for which they are not positive or cannot support. When it comes to square footage, Realtors® commonly relay information given to them by owners or obtained from the town's Assessor. Information from these sources should be accompanied by the caveat that that information may or may not be accurate and any information critical to a buyer's decision to buy should be verified.

Do buyers buy homes based on the amount of square footage? Usually, no. Primarily, it's the feel of a home, the practicality or flow of the floor plan, the location, and finances that impact a homebuyer's decision to buy. Once those basic hurdles are cleared, buyers consider whether or not their furniture fits.

There are situations where the amount of square footage is important to know. When a buyer is searching for a builder to build a home, the price per square foot can be one of the criteria to compare builders. Similarly, when one is looking to lease space for a business, knowing the cost per square foot can be an excellent comparison tool. However, when buying an existing home, the question in the minds of buyers rarely is reduced to the cost per square foot, but remains, "will my furniture fit?"

Buyers, then, should remember three things about square footage. First, sellers may or may not know the exact square footage of their home, so if they tell you the square footage, ask them how they know. They may be remembering what the square footage was when they bought the house years several years ago, long before they transformed a screened porch into a year-round heated family room.

Secondly, the square footage figure in a multiple listing printout may have been gleaned from the records of the Assessor and used for the Assessor's internal calculations. It's probable, then, that such a figure would have absolutely no relevance whatsoever to a buyer's concern about the placement of furniture.

Third, when different sources conflict on the amount of square footage in a home, a buyer who is especially keen on knowing the exact square footage of a property should verify the square footage by measuring the rooms himself or herself.

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