


REAL ESTATE

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Mary Umberger

Lots of lots make builders landed gentry

Don't worry, it's safe to come in—not a single word in this column pertains to the Super Bowl.

We're long on land

The land rush of 2005-06 is likely coming to an end as Chicago-area home builders find themselves sitting on lots of lots, according to Metrostudy, a housing-market research firm.

Though Metrostudy says Chicago builders have been able to nibble away at their supplies of unsold but completed homes, vacant land is a different story. In 2006, the supply of unsold, vacant lots increased by about 22 percent, to more than 63,000. These represent a 26.8-month supply, the highest level in five years, Metrostudy reported. Most of the lots are in Will, Kane, Kendall and McHenry Counties, which have 36,000 of them.

Nothing could be finer, etc.

Perhaps it has something to do with tropical storms, but in one sense North Carolina now outshines Florida as a relocation destination.

That's from United Van Lines, which each year since 1977 has tracked its in-bound and outbound traffic.

It said that last year, 64 percent of North Carolina's household-move shipments were incoming; 36 were outgoing. It led the nation in in-bound moves. Florida traffic was about 49



Kelly and Matt Elvin with Sammy (from left), Mandy and Boomer at their Oak Park home, which they chose partly so their golden retriever would have a yard. They have since added two Labradors and a farm in Michigan where the dogs can really romp.

Tribune photo by John Dziekan

Would-be buyers may love a house,
but when it comes to a decision, dogs rule

CANINE CLOUT

By Chuck Green | Special to the Tribune



When Kelly and Matt Elvin shop for a couch, the question isn't whether it blends with the rest of their furniture or floor plan. Foremost in their minds is whether it's right for their dogs. "We're the kind of people who literally pick out a couch based on whether there's enough room for people and dogs," Kelly Elvin said.

So it's only natural that while they loved living in the city, the Elvins relocated to Oak Park several years ago, partly so their golden retriever would have a yard. "We wanted him to be able to play and exercise, in addition to his daily walk," said Kelly. In fact, the Elvins, both formerly lawyers, have since added two Labradors. "That would have been a tight fit in our apartment."

When it comes to relocating and altering lifestyles to accommodate one or more dogs, the Elvins have plenty of company. According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association Web site, and based on the group's

2005-06 National Pet Owners Survey, 43.5 million U.S. households own a dog, and nearly 73 million dogs are owned in the country.

"Dogs are a part of the family almost as much as any other member. They're part of the home buying decision-making process," said Jim Gramata, a broker associate with Keller Williams Lincoln Park Realty. "Whether I'm listing a property and presenting it to prospective buyers, or out with clients, I understand the importance of the family pet and how homes can be passed on due to their requirements."

In fact, he said, a woman who recently at-

tended one of his open houses had to pass on a unit she liked because it wouldn't be right for her pet, who was with her.

"I told her to bring him in if she wanted because he should come check it out too. The only unit available was on the top floor, which she loved but couldn't even consider because her dog was getting old and would have had trouble handling the stairs because of bad hips," Gramata said. "She said that had happened to her several times already in her search and that she was really limited in her choices due to her dog's age, but was determined to find them both a good home."

That determination resonates with Jamie Damato, who said when she searches for a place to live, her dogs have "about a 98 percent vote. Name a choice, they have a say." Even if their choices don't necessarily coincide with hers, noted Damato, who has lived in a single-

PETS: Trying to pick up scent of the right dog domicile

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family house in Logan Square since 2005.

"The neighborhood became less my choice but the choice of my budget. Unfortunately, you don't get a nice house with a yard and good-size, dog-friendly home for a reasonable price in Lincoln Park or Lakeview.

"My ideal neighborhood would be anywhere along the lake—preferably a loft space with big windows and a deck," noted Damato, who along with Kelly Elvin is affiliated with Damato's Animal Sense Canine Training and Behavior Inc. in Chicago. However, that arrangement would be less than ideal for her dogs, a beagle mix, Doberman mix and toy poodle mix. "They need to be happy and have their needs met."

Her home, more than 2,500 square feet, includes a fenced-in back yard, "with lots of space in the house for playing."

Damato said she's moved more than 10 times since she got her first dog more than 14 years ago. "It's been a non-stop search for the perfect dog-friendly space. And since I'm such a huge dog fanatic, I always have at least two or three at any given time, whether they are mine [or whether she's pet-sitting or caring for a foster dog]. Landlords aren't so groovy about that sort of thing."



Matt and Kelly Elvin, with Mandy, Sammy and Boomer, live in Oak Park, but they have a farm in Michigan where their dogs can run without leashes.

Tribune photo by John Dziekan

Before purchasing her home, Damato lived in Uptown. "It was a decent dog set-up, situated on a park, but still didn't have a yard or a true dog-loving landlord. So I had to become my own dog-loving landlord. It was just getting old having other people make the rules for my pets."

Ideally, she said, "I wouldn't own at this point in my life, but moving as often as I did was not ideal, either. Besides, I hated that my living situation impacted my choices about fostering animals or just having a bunch of dog friends over to hang out."

When the Elvins took trips to her in-law's farm in Pennsylvania, they noticed how much their dogs liked romping freely about. So about a year and a half ago, they bought a farm in Grand Junction, in southwestern Michigan between South Haven and Kalamazoo. "We started looking for a place where we could go on weekends and have more property so our dogs could do what they do, and safely," said Kelly Elvin of the nearly 10-acre property.

"They'd always go with us to the farm in Pennsylvania and loved running off-leash, go-

ing into the woods and sniffing for rabbits. Seeing how much they liked it, we wanted them to have that experience more than once a year," Kelly said. "It's wonderful because the dogs can play off-leash. In Oak Park, you don't really have access to the kind of yard dogs can run in. There's only so much excitement you can find in a yard."

Unfortunately for Lisa and Alex Collins, when it came to their dog, a Rotweiler, and their neighbors in a Lakeview building, they had excitement they could do without, which prompted their move last May to a home with a yard on the Northwest Side.

"A couple of people had a problem having the dog in the building, which made things difficult for us." Otherwise, they would have remained longer. "It was a one-bedroom, and the first place I ever owned. It was small, but we didn't need much more space. The neighbors were a huge deterrent, so we didn't like living there any longer."

At that point, the couple found a four-unit condominium—"a decent place, but it had other issues," said Lisa. "But we had a child, and with a dog we wanted to get into a single-family home and have a yard and move a little farther out."

She remembers one place they liked in particular that had spiral staircases they felt would have been tough for their dog to negotiate. "It's difficult for a dog to get down, and two, I didn't want to be carrying a dog up and down a spiral staircase once he got older and had arthritic issues or anything, so there were places prior to this that were excluded because of an issue like that."

Damato said her dogs have no issues with her current living arrangement. "Now that I have this house, I can have a zillion dogs in and out and come and go and the only one who has veto power is my poodle."