

We Learned Firsthand Last Month About Vacant Land Scams

The Colorado Association of Realtors (CAR) issued a warning last month about scammers trying to sell vacant land that they don't own in Douglas County, noting that such scams may be happening in other Colorado counties.

One of our broker associates found himself caught up in just such a scam shortly before that alert was issued. Here is how that scam unfolded and was discovered, preventing both the property owner and buyer from being victimized.

It began with a website lead from a man wanting to list a parcel of land in Coal Creek Canyon, which I referred to a broker associate who lives in that area. He quickly got a signed listing for the property at \$100,000, and I advertised the parcel in that week's ad. A for-sale sign was installed on the parcel and a

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By JIM SMITH Realtor®

neighbor quickly snapped it up, going under contract within a week.

The scammer said he was in a cancer isolation ward and didn't have an ID with him. He needed to close quickly so he could pay his medical expenses.

The folks at First Integrity Title, which received the contract for processing, got suspicious because of no ID and sent a FedEx letter to the registered owner of the property at his home in Maryland. The owner immediately called our broker associate, incensed that his property was being sold without his knowledge or involvement.

If the title company had not taken that action, it is possible that the transaction might have gone to closing based on forged IDs from the scammer, and the proceeds of the sale would have been wired accord-

ing to the scammer's instructions. The sale would ultimately have been voided, but the buyer would have lost his money. The seller would regain legal ownership of his land.

In its October alert, CAR provided some guidance on how to recognize a vacant land scam in the making:

"In these cases, the scammer tries to list vacant land with no mortgage. He wants to sell it at below market prices for a quick sale. The scammer makes it clear there can be no in person communications, and that all communications are to be done by text or email. The scammer tells the real estate agent one of several stories about why he is out of town. He insists on a remote, no-contact closing, typically using a local Notary of his choosing. He won't accept a local Notary selected by the title company."

"The scammer has presented fraudulent driver's licenses and

fraudulent passports as identification. He uses spoofed phone numbers and untraceable email addresses."

No such scam *should* be successful so long as the title company does what First Integrity Title did, which was to contact the registered owner of the land to verify the transaction.

In listing any property for sale, it's a good practice for the listing agent to have the title company run an "own-ership and encumbrance" report, which identifies the owner and any liens against the property. Then, using an app called Forewarn (available only to licensed real estate agents), we can find the phone number of the registered owner and call him or her to verify that they are indeed who contacted us.

As a postscript, once the seller realized we were not scamming him and that we had foiled the scam attempt, he said he might list his land with us!

Reflections on Writing & Publishing My 1,000th 'Real Estate Today' Column

Because journalism was my first profession, writing a column about real estate seemed an obvious way to make myself known when I entered the real estate industry in 2003. My first column was published on July 30, 2003, and I have published at least 1,000 columns since then — 52 columns per year for most of the last 21 years. And every one was written by me, on two or more new topics each week.

From the beginning, I saw this column as my own "continuing education" program, because I had to study each topic before I could write knowledgeably about it. At first, that meant showing the first draft to my managing broker to make sure I had my facts right. Even now, I will often send a draft to a broker who has more expertise than I do in the topic I chose to write about that week.

You can see the topics of those columns going back to July 2003 at JimSmithColumns.com. The links on the older columns don't all work, but you can at least see the headlines.

I don't know of any real estate agent anywhere in the country who has taken this approach to promoting themselves, but that may be due to the fact that the vast majority of people in any profession other than the writing professions (journalists, PR folks, etc.) have trouble expressing themselves in writing.

Without this medium for promoting myself and our brokerage, I might have been one of those agents who bombards homeowners with letters and postcards saying, "I have a buyer for your home" — which may or may

not be the truth.

I much prefer to spend those hours being of service to the general public, studying every aspect of real estate that I can think of (and about which I, too, would like to know more), and then sharing it with my readers.

My training in journalism came from writing and editing my prep school and college newspapers but most especially from winning a summer internship in 1968 at *The Washington Post*. After college, I practiced what I had learned by launching community newspapers in Brooklyn and Manhattan — for which I wrote a column, of course!

While journalism is my passion, I like the reputation it has built for me as a real estate professional. I love getting emails, texts and calls asking my advice or reacting to something I have written. And when a reader calls me about selling or buying a home, I like knowing that the call was based on the trust and reputation I have built over 21 years of writing this column.

Often, when I go on a listing appointment, I find that the seller has a folder containing clippings of my columns. I recall one listing presentation where the seller mentioned a particular issue of concern to her. "I wrote about that topic a few years ago," I said, whereupon she opened a manila folder in which that old column was on the top of my other columns.

My first year in this business, I attended a retreat hosted by one of the preeminent real estate coaches. Following that event, I hired that coach's firm briefly, but the focus was on

memorizing scripts and "time blocking" several hours per day for cold-calling. I couldn't do it. It just wasn't my style. I have never memorized a script and never made a cold call — in fact, never prospected at all. This column has made success possible without prospecting. My time is much better spent researching and writing this column.

At first I published monthly, then bi-weekly, and within a year or two I was able to write this column every week. At first I bought a page in a little Golden newspaper because I couldn't afford the *Golden Transcript*. When *The Denver Post* introduced the regionalized "YourHub" section, I jumped on it, limited to the Jefferson County editions.

Then the *Golden Transcript* offered me an attractive rate. When over 20 metro area weeklies were consolidated under the non-profit ownership of Colorado Community Media, I expanded to include my ad in all of them. I had already expanded to be in all the local editions of YourHub.

A couple months ago, I signed a contract with the *Denver Gazette*, the final step in reaching a full metro audience.

I am also online, with over 1,300 email subscribers to our blog at <http://RealEstateToday.substack.com>.

For me as a journalist, there is no greater pleasure and satisfaction than what I get from having my writings published so broadly throughout the metro area I call home. Thank you for putting up with me using this space to share my story with you instead of writing about another real estate topic.

Showings Begin on Golden Duplex



This well-built duplex at 12613 W. 8th Ave., Golden, was featured as "coming soon" last week. A narrated video tour is at GoldenDuplex.online. Open Saturday, 11am to 1 pm. Or call **Kathy Jonke** at 303-990-7428 to request a showing.

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Golden Real Estate lists and sells residential properties across the entire metro area.