

Atlanta home buying and selling goes virtual, and succeeds

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Jun 19, 2020, 10:23am EDT

When the coronavirus pandemic shut down the economy, one industry that continued to forge ahead was residential real estate. Across metro Atlanta, the industry quickly adapted, with virtual ways of communicating with clients, showing homes and even handling socially distanced closings.

Georgia's real estate industry was deemed an essential service, as realtors found there was still a demand for homes among both buyers and sellers, according to Faron King, broker and owner of Coldwell Banker High Country Realty.

“We ended up the month of April and May beating our numbers from the same months last year, even when most of the month of April, we were sheltered in place,” said King, also the president of the Georgia Realtors Association.



Faron King, broker and owner of Coldwell Banker High Country Realty.

The demand for vacation and second homes in North Georgia continued to grow as well. Buyers reached out to agents to see properties even as hotels and restaurants, and the rest of the hospitality industry, shut down.

“We realized early on that [Georgia Realtors Association] needed to get out in front of [the changing industry landscape] so our members could continue to work, continue to keep transactions moving forward,” King said, adding that the association worked with Gov. Brian Kemp’s office on an electronic notary system and the Georgia Bar Association on virtual closings. [This] “allowed some of those properties that were contracted [to] move ahead and be able to close. That was critical to keep things moving.”

Real estate professionals already used online tools such as Facebook, Zoom and smartphone videos but in this new normal, these tools are even more emphasized. For example, Lauren-Leigh Wall and her husband were getting ready to sell their home in Austin, Texas and move to Atlanta when the pandemic hit. Unable to travel to the city, they depended on their agents to find the right neighborhood and home for them. The agents took their criteria – a good school system that could accommodate a child with special needs – and guided them through surrounding areas, said Wall, adding that the couple did home tours via FaceTime.

During this time of social distancing, the real estate industry experts became even more crucial, Wall said.

“It’s just a different experience,” she added, “but it really does help validate the realtors for us.”

That trust in their agent helped the couple select a home in Cobb County, which they only saw in person just before closing.

Wall isn’t the only buyer willing to shop virtually. In a recent survey conducted by the National Association of Realtors, 41% of respondents indicated that, thanks to the internet, they can envision buying a home without setting foot inside.

Real estate agents are using more technology to help with showings, according to Avery McMahan, a broker with Harry Norman.

“Videos and photos of our listings are more important now than ever,” said McMahan. “The buyers that aren’t comfortable [visiting properties] are doing a lot more homework before they actually step foot into a house and decide that it’s something they want to visit in person. We have fewer people seeing 10 to 12 houses a day. They’re seeing three to four, because they have narrowed down what they’re interested in beforehand.”



Avery McMahon, a broker with Harry Norman.

When an agent does a walk-through with their client on the other end of a FaceTime video, the client can “experience it as if they're there,” said Cynthia Lippert, managing broker of Ansley Atlanta North Fulton and president-elect of the Atlanta Realtors Association.

In the past, part of the residential real estate sales process was “caravans,” groups of realtors traveling to homes being promoted by other agents. Now these caravans have gone virtual. The video conferencing service Zoom has become one of the tools of choice for getting professionals together to see properties.

Realtors create a Zoom invitation that is sent out to invited agents all over and the agents come in Zoom, said Lippert. “They're sharing their screens and all of the pictures and data, and everything they want to talk about on a particular home. They'll share the video that they produced at the home, and [agents] have an opportunity to ask questions. And the listing agent has the opportunity to answer those questions.”

In-person tours still are happening, but have become a more careful experience. Prospective buyers usually find gloves, masks and even booties outside, and are expected to wear them while in the house.

Sales are continuing to happen for new homes as well. Taylor Morrison, a new home builder, was doing brisk sales during 2019. After a slump in early January, business picked back up again.

“It's really turned around and is in better shape than we had ever hoped that it would be,” said Rick Carruthers, regional president of Taylor Morrison.

The company implemented virtual tools for buyers to set up appointments to see homes, and, said Carruthers, more than 4,500 appointments have been scheduled online. The types of appointments include in-person tours, phone calls and virtual tours, he added.

Home buyers also are adapting to new ways of closing on their purchases to reflect “greater sensitivity to the individual circumstances of each person that we work with,” said Tonia Sellers, managing partner at Weissman, a firm that handles the process. “During a pandemic, of course, there's a heightened level of concern about health.”

Weissman developed a flexible approach to closings, including signings outdoors and having each party in separate conference rooms to minimize physical contact. Within its office, conference rooms have been set up with plexiglass screens that allow participants to see each other.

Some closings can be completed using video-conferencing tools, for example, loan refinances.

Jessi Heneghan, a recent homebuyer, described her unusual closing process as a “really drastically different experience than we had been planning on. In my mind, this was going to be kind of my big victorious moment of closing on a house as a single mom.”

Instead, she sat in her minivan in a parking lot. The attorney, in gloves and a mask, passed documents back and forth through the car window. In between, Heneghan kept her kids entertained with snacks and videos.

While social distancing requirements will eventually pass, many virtual ways of showing and closing on homes are likely to persist, real estate professionals agreed.

“It's made our realtors able to show their value even more to their clients,” said MaMahon. “I really think the technology that we're rolling out is making it easier for not only our realtors, but also our clients.”