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REAL ESTATE

Pssst! It's no secret

Forget privacy deals. Every
sale price is a click away.

BY JEFF BERTOLUCCI

Special to The Times

PACIFIC PALISADES Realtor Anthony Marguleas has found that when the rich or the reticent deal in real estate, they sometimes want the details kept mum. Especially what they paid for a property.

To that end, the Combined Los Angeles/Westside (CLAW) Multiple Listing Service, which covers a large swath of Los Angeles County including the upscale Brentwood, Beverly Hills and Pacific Palisades areas, charges a \$250 "confidentiality fee" to keep a sale price off the MLS.

When a few of his well-heeled clients tipped him off, however, Marguleas discovered that these "secret" prices aren't private after all.

It turns out that finding a purportedly confidential sale price — at least in Los Angeles County — is remarkably easy for anyone who knows the property address or assessor's identification number and has access to the Internet.

The county assessor's website, at <http://www.lacountyassessor.com/extranet/DataMaps/pais.aspx> lists recent sale prices, tax roll values and other information for properties within its boundaries, including those homes with heretofore hidden prices. Other Southern California counties, including Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura, also post tax roll values on their sites, but they don't post recent sale prices.

A client who bought a \$2-million home in Santa Monica was among those to spot his property's sale price on the L.A.

County site, Marguleas said. "He said, 'Hey, Anthony, you told me this wasn't going to be reported, and I found out it was.'"

Another client, Jed Petrick of Pacific Palisades, paid the fee when he bought in Pacific Palisades.



ROBERT NEUBECKER FOR THE TIMES

'Confidential' prices pop up on the Web

"I am very surprised and disappointed to find out that after paying the \$250 fee to the MLS," Petrick said, "that it does not make the sale price of my home confidential."

Apparently, the fee to list a sale price as \$0 only applies within the MLS.

All property exchanges and sales prices are reported to and recorded by their respective counties so that property taxes can be assessed for the new owners. Since 2000, the L.A. County registrar-recorder has sent the assessor electronic copies of recorded deeds, as well as a separate file listing the buyer and seller names (which remain confidential) and the recording date, document number and transfer tax.

The problem is, the assessor posts all sale prices online, even supposedly secret ones.

County assessors, however, do provide a mechanism for homeowners to keep price information private. The buyer, when recording the grant deed, must indicate that the transfer tax is not a public record. The county then lists the sale price as \$0, places the documentary transfer tax amount on the back of the deed (or on a separate form attached to the deed) and stamps "transfer tax is not a public record" on the front of the deed. This is done because transfer tax can be used to determine a sale price.

In L.A. County, for example, the transfer tax is \$1.10 per \$1,000, and in the city of Los Angeles, it's \$4.50 per \$1,000. So if \$1 million was paid for a home, the total transfer tax would be \$5,600.

L.A. County doesn't charge a fee to hide the tax.

But so-called "confidential" prices have always been public record. Before computers, searching for sale prices required visiting or phoning the local county assessor office to access the information.

"If you know where to look for it, you can find it," said L.A. County Assistant Assessor Bonnie Oliver.

Posting sale prices online is perfectly legal. The state revenue and taxation code "allows the assessor to post the sales price when known by us," Oliver said. "And, of course, we know it, so we need to display it."

The wealthy aren't the only ones who sometimes want to hide a sale price. Builder and real estate flippers — speculators who buy and then quickly resell homes — often want to conceal what they paid to keep prospective buyers from discovering their markup.

"When a builder buys a tear-down in Manhattan Beach, they don't want people to know what they

paid," said Michael Davin, executive vice president of Catalist Homes, a South Bay brokerage. "They would buy it, scrape it, and nine months later have a house up, and they didn't want people to know what the profit was."

There is a window of about two to three months before the sale information appears on the assessor's site. For example, Oliver said, "the January-February sales are not usually processed until the end of March."

If a home's sale price isn't yet listed, the property's current tax roll value can be determined by adding the land and improvement figures, which also are posted on the site.

As for the names of the buyers and sellers, state law requires that home addresses of certain public officials, including judges and police officers, not be disclosed on the Internet.

"But we don't have a way to sort through our roll and tag the ones that fall under that category," Oliver said. So the site doesn't list homeowners at all. One can, however, find out who owns a property by calling or visiting one of the assessor's branch offices. A list of assessor branch offices and phone numbers can be found at <http://www.lacountyassessor.com/extranet/contactUs/pubPhone.aspx>.

In Brentwood and Pacific Palisades, the number of \$0 sale homes is up 250% since 2001, said Marguleas, who compiled data from the CLAW Multiple Listing Service for an upcoming book on real estate secrets and myths.

Annie Ives, chief executive of CLAW, confirmed the number of confidential sales is on the rise. There were 376 \$0 sales reported last year, up from 264 in 2003, she said.

Although CLAW charges a \$250 "confidentiality fee" to report a home sale as \$0, if the price is published elsewhere, the service will change the \$0 to the published amount. Despite evidence to the contrary, Ives disputed that L.A. County posts the prices of \$0 sale homes.

"We'd hear about it" if the county was posting confidential prices online, said Ives, who added that CLAW hasn't received any complaints from homeowners about it.

Most other Multiple Listing Services in Southern California don't offer a \$0 sale option. The CRISNET (Computerized Real Estate Information System) MLS, which covers Burbank, Simi Valley and the San Fernando and Santa Clarita valleys, doesn't charge a confidentiality fee and won't hide sale prices.

Sale prices "are public data, and even though there are ways to hide the information, they're still

public and can be looked at," said Mary Lou Williams, assistant executive vice president of the Southland Regional Assn. of Realtors, which runs CRISNET.

Similarly, confidentiality fees are not charged by the i-Tech MLS, which includes Glendale, Montrose and La Cañada Flintridge, the Downey Assn. of Realtors (part of the Southern California MLS) or the Palos Verdes Peninsula Assn. of Realtors (part of the Greater South Bay MLS). The Southern California MLS and Greater South Bay MLS let member associations set their own policies and fees.

Although \$0 sale requests are quite popular in the chic environs of West L.A., this doesn't seem to be the case in other areas. "We're talking one out of the last 10,000 listings," said Jeanette Baumann, executive vice president of the Downey Assn. of Realtors, of her region.

Even some real estate professionals aren't aware that the L.A. County site posts actual prices of \$0 sale homes. Many are nonplused by the revelation.

"A lot of people give themselves a false sense of protection," said Westwood agent Mia Shin of Global Properties International.

"If somebody really wants to know, they could find out," Catalist's Davin said.

For example, with the documentary transfer tax or property tax bill, it's easy to determine what was paid for a home. If the tax rate is 1.25% and the annual property tax bill is \$12,500, divide the latter by the former to reveal the \$1-million sale price.

Although not all county assessors post sale prices online, many provide property tax information. In Orange County, the treasurer-tax collector provides property tax roll information at tax.ocgov.com/tcweb/search_page.asp. Type in a street address or the assessor's parcel number to uncover the property tax bill.

Ventura County provides a similar service at prop-tax.countyofventura.org, as does Riverside County at riverside.ca.ezgov.com/ and San Bernardino County at <http://www.co.san-bernardino.ca.us/ttc/tr> (click on "How much are my property taxes?"). Each county posts assessed properties' values, but none lists the names of property owners.

"People are paranoid about the intrusion of government," Marguleas said, "and everything's available online."

But are they too paranoid? After all, neighbors, friends and acquaintances may be indifferent to what someone paid for a home.

Asked Beverly Hills Realtor Murray Weisburg: "Who really cares?"

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