

# Pet Realtors Defy Sagging Housing Market

by Kris O'Donnell



Realtors are finding that the weak housing market has legs, that is, if it includes four furry legs. (Pet Pulse Photo by Kris O'Donnell, Design by Mike Lloyd)

**August 11, 2008**

ORLANDO -- Sherice Ward adores her 3-year-old Labrador retriever, Lacey, so she and her family went looking for a new home, the dog's needs were equally considered.

Ward says she heard from friends about a development called Avalon Park.

"It's a very pet friendly area," Ward said. "People are always walking with their pets."

Pets and their families are a growing segment of the real estate industry, and catering to a specific type of clientele in these tough economic times is a key to success, realtors say.

"It's extremely important being in this industry," real estate agent Marc Grossman said. "You can't be something for everyone; you really need to develop your niche."

Grossman is an agent with the Florida-based Pet Realty Network, which specializes in connecting people with pet-friendly agents and properties across the nation.

The subprime mortgage crisis, skyrocketing foreclosures and falling home values have battered the industry. According to a Standard and Poor's housing index, home prices in the top 20 U.S. cities alone fell by a record 16 percent in May.

In this economic climate, agents must differentiate from their competitors, according to Pet Realty Network founder Rhona Sutter.

More than 10 million families moved with their pets last year, and while there are no definitive sales numbers, Sutter says that focusing on buyers with pets helps agents stand out in the market.

Developers such as KB Homes, which has nearly 1,000 homes in Avalon Park, are among those responding to the growing pet market.

“Some people, that’s their world,” KB Homes consultant Candice Roberts said of people that cater to their pets. “Whether it be empty-nesters who just have the dog and the cat, or just people in general.

“They’re single with pets, or a couple with pets. Pets are like their children.”

While KB says pet-friendly homes do not necessarily have more square footage, the building specs do keep pets in mind.

“People will buy a one-story home because they know their pets cannot go up and down the stairs,” Roberts said. “We have a wide variety of floor plans to offer homebuyers who have pets, to fit their needs and their pet’s needs.”

The open floor plans were a big selling point for Ward.

“It could accommodate her (Lacey) and she’s not under your feet, and tripping over her because she is a big girl,” Ward said.

Avalon Park also has a large dog park and dog-friendly restaurants. Residents can dine outside and do not have to leave their dog at home.

Focusing on pets means a win-win for everyone, according to developers.

“It’s just one more amenity to offer someone so you have the whole package,” Roberts said. “Not only do you love your home, but the pet loves your home as well.”

Regardless of when the housing market finally begins to recover, Grossman says demographics show that pets will only play a bigger real estate role in the future.

“It’s definitely a growing area because of the baby boomers,” Grossman said. “A lot of people are opting not to have children.

“It’s a major growing market.”

For more information, visit the Pet Realty Network’s Web site at [PetRealtyNetwork.com](http://PetRealtyNetwork.com).

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