

## Pet-friendly homes a rare breed

NAPLES, Fla. – July 25, 2016 – "Rentals are changing. They now include pet amenities. They're almost more accommodating to the dog than the tenant, it seems." – Rhona Sutter, founder of Naples, Fla.-based Pet Realty Network.

Finding a potential home or rental is hard enough in today's real estate market where competitively priced homes are quickly snatched up. Throw a family pet in the mix, and your options shrink significantly.

As more Americans treat their pets as members of the family, the real estate industry has certainly adapted: luxury apartments are becoming more pet-friendly, and some landlords are less restrictive with their pet policies. But home seekers still face a variety of challenges when searching for a place that they and their pets can call home. And complexes that allow pets can still be hard to find, experts say, and even pet-friendly policies often come with strings attached.

For renters, having a pet significantly narrows the available inventory. A recent search on Zillow.com showed 9,842 listings available for rent in New Jersey. But, when the search was adjusted to show rentals that allow pets, the number dropped to 1,709.

Rhona Sutter, the founder of Naples, Fla.-based Pet Realty Network, said she created the pet-friendly, nationwide network that connects pet owners with "pet-friendly" agents for that very reason. Sutter, who emigrated from London to Florida in the '90s, said she was surprised at how hard it was to find a home for rent that would accommodate her 85-pound dog. To help others in a similar situation, she established the network in 1997 and has been helping pet owners since.

Sutter said rentals have in recent years warmed up to pets.

In Bergen and Passaic counties, a number of rental communities advertise on their websites that they are pet-friendly.

Rutherford Station in East Rutherford offers an on-site dog park, according to its website. Around the property, there are stations with baggies and garbage receptacles for residents when they walk their dogs.

In nearby Wood-Ridge, AvalonBay at Wesmont Station offers a pet-friendly program. According to its website, the community hosts social events for pets, including a "Doggie Paddle Pool Party," "Yappy Hours," a "Howl-O-Week Party" and costume contest, a pet CPR class, and national dog and cat days.

Still, these pet-friendly amenities often come with a price or restrictions. At Rutherford

Station, renters are limited to two pets per apartment home, asked to pay a \$500 non-refundable pet fee and a pet rent of \$55 per month, and prohibited from having aggressive breeds or dogs that weigh more than 50 pounds, according to its website. At AvalonBay in Wood-Ridge, renters are also limited to two pets per home and prohibited from housing so-called aggressive breeds, according to its website. Greystar, who owns Rutherford Station, and AvalonBay, both declined to comment further.

Lyndhurst resident Stacy Blauvelt, 26, said she and her boyfriend have been searching for their first apartment since May. Because she works in Hoboken and her boyfriend works in Toms River, the couple has made it a priority to find an apartment that is both near a train station and would accommodate her two cats.

When Blauvelt found apartments that did allow pets, she said she was asked for fees that were "out of this world" and in some cases required "pet interviews" with her cats. In one instance, she said her 14-pound cat was above the 10-pound limit that one rental property set. "It's really upsetting to know a lot of places aren't pet friendly, and if they are, they're going to charge me the moon to bring them," said Blauvelt. "I feel like I'm being taken advantage of. I feel like they know they can squeeze all the money out of me because they know how much people love their pets."

Blauvelt said that she and her boyfriend decided to expand to towns without train stations in hopes of finding more pet-friendly rentals. But, she said, "All these sacrifices we have to make just so I can bring my two cats is absolutely disheartening."

According to Eloise Brown, the owner of Town Life Realty in Rockaway and a member of the Pet Realty Network, the North Jersey market "is very tight in terms of finding an apartment that allows pets."

Brown, who has clients in Passaic County and surrounding areas, said the inventory for pet-friendly apartments is so low in comparison to the number of pet owners looking for homes, that an apartment that allows pets is likely to sell fast. She said when she works with sellers who have apartments that stay on the market longer than expected, she advises that allowing pets would be a good selling point. Landlords who allow pets also have the power to raise rents for their properties, Brown said.

"If a landlord has reservations, they can increase the monthly rent," said Brown. She noted that landlords now "are asking very pointed questions," when pets are involved. For dogs, it may include the dog's breed, size, or if they're house trained.

Lara Librie, 24, and originally of Paramus, said she had difficulty finding an apartment because her English bulldog was considered a big dog. "Despite the fact that he's an English bulldog and sleeps all day long, no one wanted anything to do with us," said Librie, a graduate student.

"I finally chose my apartment that I'm in now because they are the only dog-friendly complex around the area that was reasonably priced," said Librie, who now lives at the

Brookchester Apartments, a luxury rental community in New Milford.

Pet owners interested in buying homes are often unaware of the potential issues that may arise with certain properties, Sutter said.

### **Homebuyers with pets**

"It's so important to know every single ordinance [in their town] before they put in an offer," said Sutter, explaining that a buyer might be quick to assume that a home with an unfenced yard could easily be adjusted to accommodate a dog. She warned, sometimes a buyer may close on a home, then find out that a town does not allow for a fenced yard, or that a fence may only be a certain height. For big dogs that can easily jump a low fence, that could be problematic.

Sutter said pet owners should also consider more obvious factors before closing on a home, such as whether a home on a busy street may pose a danger to a pet, or if a home with too many stairs may be troublesome for a large, elderly dog.

"Pet owners think of pets as part of the family," Sutter said. When searching for a home "you would do the same for your pet, as you would a grandfather, a husband or partner."

© Copyright 2016, Herald News (West Paterson, NJ), Melanie Anzidei.