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Home is where the bark is

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When Sherice Ward and her family were house-hunting last year, they had the usual list of requirements: house size, price range, quality of schools and the like.

But because of an amenity that appealed to Lacey, Avalon Park collared their attention and became the leader of the residential pack.

"We could walk there," Ward says of a paw park where the family now takes Lacey, the family's 3 1/2 -year-old chocolate Labrador mix, for a romp with her friends.

The pet amenities and general animal-friendly atmosphere were big selling points for Ward, whose household includes husband Kevin; son Wyatt, 11; kitties Tom-Tom and Tux; and lizards Victoria and Jessie. They moved into their new home last July.

"People have their dogs out, about and around," she says, noting that dogs are welcome at outside restaurant tables and town events such as the wine and food festival.

"We wouldn't have moved there if it wasn't pet-friendly," she says.

Like the Wards, more people are thinking of their furry companions as members of the family -- members whose needs deserve attention when the family moves to a neighborhood. Eager developers are sitting up and taking notice, speaking up about their pet-friendly qualities.

"We have to please the entire family," says Dean Luce, vice president of sales and marketing for KB Home, a primary home builder in Avalon Park, "and dogs are part of that family."

No one keeps definitive numbers, but Rhona Sutter, founder and owner of Naples-based PetRealtyNetwork .com, sees more and more home buyers looking for creature comforts for their companion animals.

Sutter's site is a resource for those seeking pet-friendly communities and real-estate agents, as well as veterinarians and pet services in their new neighborhood.

Doghouseproperties.com of Charleston, S.C., offers similar advice and services for renters.

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The most popular amenities are paw parks, where dogs can slip the leash and stretch their legs, Sutter says, and stables in communities that cater to equine owners.

Other amenities can include dog-friendly walking trails that look like human trails, except with plastic bags and waste receptacles for cleanup.

A pet-friendly home

Some owners also want pet perks in their homes, Sutter says, such as dog-wash areas or ceilings high enough to accommodate tall cat trees.

And they want community amenities close by. Like Ward, they would rather walk to a paw park than drive to one down the road, no matter how nice and friendly it might be. And Central Florida boasts some pretty highly regarded hound grounds, including the Paw Park of Historic Sanford, Fleet Peoples Park in Winter Park, and parks in Winter Springs and west Orange County, among others.

Some communities also host pet-related events for pet-loving residents and potential buyers.

Avalon's first puppy-petting party was held in the fall of 2006 and featured treats for pets and humans and adoptions offered by Pet Rescue by Judy, a private nonprofit organization dedicated to cat and dog rescue.

Blackstone, another KB Home community off Narcoossee Road near St. Cloud, is planning a Pamper Your Pet Party from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 18. A mobile groomer will be on hand, says Luce of KB Home, and this free event is open to the public.

A singles park?

Besides a pets-as-kids philosophy, what's behind the upswing in animal amenities? Community building trends are one explanation.

Fido used to frolic in the front yard with the kids, but yards are smaller in many communities now. Dogs need a place to run -- and owners can use a place to socialize.

Pet amenities can be especially attractive to single homeowners. While the pooches are playing, singles can mingle.

"What's a better ingredient than a dog when you're trying to meet someone?" says Melinda Brody, owner of Melinda Brody and Co., a real estate sales-training company in Orlando.

Sixty-one percent of pet owners are childless, she says, citing figures she uses in her speeches to home-building industry groups.

"Singles love to walk their dogs and meet other singles," she says. "It's a win-win situation."

Builders and developers who want to sell to pet parents should try to connect on a more animal level, Brody says. Offer dog biscuits in model homes, she suggests, or provide personalized pet dishes for new owners.

"Little details make a huge difference" to pet owners, says Brody, who owns a 5-year-old cockatiel named Scooby.

But lavishing too much attention on pet-lovers can come back to bite you.

Too many animal amenities can turn off people who don't like pets, says Marc Grossman, an agent with Keller Williams Premier Realty in Longwood, "and I don't see developers wanting to preclude those possible buyers."

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