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Tips on finding country property
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—You catch yourself staring at the napkins on your kitchen table in Suburb, USA early on a Saturday morning. The week's stress is over; another begins on Monday. You say to yourself, "I need a piece of the country." How do you start?

Pick a target county. Decide what you want to do and where you want to be—mountains, beach, small town, farm, woods. Then drive in that direction. Purposeful wandering around orients you. It's quality time. Choose a county that's no more than a four-hour drive from your principal residence. Three's better than four, and two's best. Unfortunately, prices are more expensive closer in. Buyers get more for their money at \$2,500 per acre four hours away than \$10,000 per acre within a two-hour drive. Convenience costs.

Find a local lawyer. This is your first step. You want a person who has been practicing for a while in that county and does real-estate work. Your lawyer's knowledge and advice at the outset will focus your search and save you money. Start your lawyer's billable clock with your first question. These are extremely productive dollars. You are buying both information and friendship. Ask about the different parts of the county, prices, building and zoning regs and pending projects that might affect you. Ask for recommendations — lenders, real-estate agents, surveyors, appraisers, excavators, contractors, consulting foresters and anyone else you might need. Drive around the areas your lawyer suggests. Do this before you contact a real-estate agent with listings.

Subscribe to the county newspaper. It will carry ads from local brokers and For Sale By Owners (FSBOs). Get a feel for local politics and issues of current concern.

Check online listings. See what's being offered locally at sites like these: www.landwatch.com; www.realtor.com; www.landandfarm.com; www.elandusa.com; www.landsofamerica.com; www.houses4sale-online.com; www.rliland.net; and www.unitedcountry.com. Buyers can search by state (and often by zip code or county) and property type.

Take a Land-Wanted ad in the local paper. State what you prefer in terms of acreage, improvements and location. Don't include your price range. Have replies sent to "Land Buyer" at a local post-office box. Pay your lawyer to forward them to you with comments.

Put the word out. As you interview individuals your lawyer has

recommended, tell them what you're seeking. Property may be available through personal contacts.

Visit listed property with a real-estate agent. In most cases, an agent will be representing the seller and his interests, not the buyer. That is the legal duty of a listing agent and those who are cooperating agents. A buyer is most protected in this process by working with an exclusive buyer agent (EBA at www.naeba.org), or, if none are available, an agent who agrees to represent you, the buyer, in your search and purchase. An EBA never works for sellers. Agents who are members of the Realtors Land Institute (www.rliland.com) have training and experience in rural land sales. Look for the designation, Accredited Land Consultant (ALC). Good agents know how to help a buyer without compromising their obligation to the seller who is paying their commission. Ask your lawyer to help you write a contract offer.

Auctions. Good deals are sometimes available when property is auctioned without reserve. An absolute auction means property is sold for the highest bid, no matter how low. Buyers must thoroughly research such properties before bidding. Contingencies are not accepted on auction sales; buyers are buying property "as is."

Patience, persistence and research. You don't need to swing at the first pitch...unless it's exactly what you want and priced right.

Curtis Seltzer, land consultant, is the author of *How To Be A DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property* at www.curtis-seltzer.com. He holds a Class A residential contractor's license in Virginia and has lived in a now 90-year-old farmhouse for 25 years.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com