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How to Live Happily in Metro Atlanta: Know Your Tradeoffs

Your realtor drives you to a home near the Perimeter, and it's perfect — the right style, the right size, the right school district and close to the right price. The traffic, though... It's going to add another 40 minutes to your daily commute. There are eight showings its first day on the market, including yours. Unless the place is a total wreck on the inside you've decided to make an offer.

In our post-pandemic world, Atlanta is a seller's market with about five buyers competing for every available home. In the rush to find something acceptable, you might brush off the factors that make a great home a not-so-great choice for your family. If you're ignoring things that would have been deal-breakers in a less disruptive market, I encourage you to take a step back. Before jumping into the market, carefully ponder the quality-of-life tradeoffs you're truly willing to make.

Here are three of the biggest conundrums faced by Atlanta-area home buyers.

1. Traffic Tradeoffs

Like any major metro area, Atlanta has traffic woes. Although volume was uncharacteristically light in the COVID era, it's steadily creeping up. Will it return to the previous "normal?" That's hard to say, especially since many companies are allowing their employees to continue working remotely. And more people are moving where they prefer to live instead of where they needed to live for work. Only time will tell what traffic will be like post-pandemic.

When my wife and I lived in the Lawrenceville-Suwanee area, my wife commuted was about two hours each day. The time investment wasn't ideal but our new-ish ranch home provided a home we loved at a value that helped us add to savings.

Eventually, my wife was spending more time in the car than she was awake, and it was time to make a change. When we looked at homes closer to Atlanta, our tradeoffs for a shorter commute were a more expensive home, no yard and less money to squirrel away. What we got in return was more quality time at home, less money spent in fossil fuels and better proximity to more employers. It worked for us.



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Before you close on a home, get out there and make the drive – to and from work, school, soccer practice, music lessons – morning, noon and night. The length of traffic lights change by time of day and can drastically affect your commute. Once out of the carpool lineup, is there another backup on the road to the soccer fields? What happens when more companies call employees back to the office? It all adds up.

Assess the pros and cons and be honest with yourself and each other. The quality-of-life for one member of the family affects everyone in the home. If the traffic and congestion are gnawing at your conscience, listen, and be sure you can live with the tradeoff.

2. Neighborhood Newness

Areas of Atlanta with older homes have been popular for their relative affordability and closeness to the city. In the past 20 years, however, those neighborhoods have undergone transitions: So-called urban “infill” has seen the building of new, larger homes among the neighborhood’s original bungalows and two story traditionals.

Infill itself is not bad, nor is it specific to Atlanta. In fact, the changes can often improve a neighborhood’s appeal can lead to home appreciation. Yet infill does create circumstances that homebuyers need to consider.

If you buy an older home knowing you’ll eventually add-on or rebuild, then buying in a neighborhood with infill may be a solid investment. But if you want to live in an older home indefinitely, as is, you won’t likely get a return on any dollars you invest. For example, will you be okay with buying a new A/C unit when the next buyer will probably tear down the house? What if your bungalow becomes shadowed on each side by new, million-dollar homes.





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Those are not trick questions; you may be fine with either one. And while you may never get a direct return on investing in home improvements, the value of your lot may increase over time. And, if your biggest goal is to find an affordable place within walking distance to work, none of that other stuff may matter.

In short, no home will have everything you want, and no purchase is a guaranteed slam-dunk. The trick is to keep your eyes open to both good and not-so-good and understand your tolerance for change.

3. Zigzagging Zoning

Few things stress-out homeowners more than a re-zoning sign. You've seen them along the road – the ones with hard-to-read lettering and strange-looking codes. Proposed residential changes are often requests to increase density, which is a fancy word for smaller lots and higher home occupancy than current zoning allows. Commercial changes are typically high rises or live-work communities.

Like urban infill, there is nothing inherently bad about zoning changes. What gets homeowners upset are the unknowns such as how much traffic they will add or how they'll change neighborhood aesthetics. While certainly some changes may not be welcome, the new and updated construction can also bring an influx of new jobs, better roads and conveniently located merchants.

The bottom line? Learn more about what's happening in the neighborhood you want to live in. Talk to potential neighbors out walking their dogs. Make an appointment at the local zoning commission. Subscribe to [Atlanta Business Chronicle](#) and the Facebook pages of local communities for development updates. Zoning changes are unavoidable in a growing metropolis like ours. The key is to make sure the neighborhood is one you want to live in not only today but well into the future.

As a realtor committed to honesty and integrity in all I do, I cannot tell my clients where to buy or what kind of home to buy. That must be a personal decision based on individual or family needs. But with tools like this blog, I am happy to share knowledge that can help you understand your options and make the exciting but sometimes difficult decisions we all face as Atlanta homeowners.