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IN TODAY'S CHALLENGING HOUSING MARKET, the home inspection is more critical than ever. Buyers are scared. Many bank-owned properties are in deteriorated condition. The information presented in a home inspection never has been more important.

The pre-purchase, general home inspection is a visual examination of the components of a house. The intention is to provide the buyer with useful information about the residence and to identify major deficiencies. It is an important part of the home buying and selling process.

Realtors and sellers of homes want the home inspection to go well. To ensure that the process goes smoothly, it is important that the seller prepare the property for inspection.

The following is a list Realtors and sellers can follow to allow the home inspection to proceed efficiently as possible:

Provide access to the property to be inspected. Doors should be unlocked or the key/garage door openers readily accessible.

If the seller is required to provide access to the property, be there at the appointed time.

Check that the gas, water and electric utilities are on. This is of special concern in vacant or multifamily residences. Frequently, inspections are canceled and deals fall apart because sellers refuse to turn on utilities. The reluctance by banks to turn on utilities is mystifying and makes the realtor's job far more difficult.

When banks permit buyers to examine a property but refuse to turn on utilities, it's comparable to a used car salesman inviting a buyer to test drive a used car but refusing to put a battery or gas in the vehicle.

Check that all pilot lights are lit, hot water tanks and heating systems are operable, appliances are connected and that all water valves are "on" (weather permitting).

Remove pots and pans from cooking equipment.

Remove laundry from washers and dryers.

Remove dishes and clutter from kitchen countertops and sinks.

Clean up the house. Dirty, smelly homes turn off buyers.

Clean up the yard. Buyers, realtors and home inspectors do not enjoy stepping in animal waste.

Control pets. Barking and or jumping dogs make it difficult for the home inspector to do his/her job. Chasing a runaway cat is detrimental to the inspection process.

Do not run water (except for required toilet flushing) during the inspection. Running a dishwasher, doing laundry, showering, car washing, lawn watering, etc., are disruptive to the inspector's testing procedures.

Provide easy access to heating systems, hot water tanks and appliances.

Replace burned-out light bulbs. Proper illumination is essential to the home inspection process.

Make certain that all fuses and/or circuit breakers are operable.

Make certain that all smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors are operable. Replace batteries as required.

Disarm alarm systems. Appearances by police and fire departments during inspections are disruptive.

Control children. Inquisitive or disruptive children are an impediment to the inspection process.

Provide access to the water meter, gas meter and electrical panel. Remove pictures or decorative items used to conceal electrical panels.

Provide access to hatches or crawl spaces. If access to a crawl space is through a closet ceiling or floor, remove contents of the closets or storage rooms as necessary to facilitate access. If access panels are extraordinarily obscure, leave a note to assist the inspector in locating these panels.

If any repair or replacement work (roofing, foundation, heating systems, basement waterproofing, siding or windows, electrical/plumbing, etc.) has been done recently, provide inspector with copies of relevant paperwork.

Have disclosure forms, engineering reports, point-of-sale information and/or any other pertinent documentation regarding the property available to the inspector.

Provide as much visibility as reasonably possible for garage walls, basement walls, attics, storage rooms, etc.