

Realtors group looks at firm to book showings

By James Schlett

CAPITAL REGION – The Greater Capital Association of Realtors is eyeing a centralized call appointment service, which could result in the most significant change to the daily operations of its 4,000 members in about six years.

Wanting to improve the way real estate agents arrange property showings, GCAR is considering contracting Centralized Showing Service. The Kansas City company would field phone calls from Realtors representing sellers and buyers interested in properties listed in the organization's Multiple Listing Service.

Centralized Showing will demonstrate its appointment center services for GCAR members next Wednesday at the Desmond Hotel and Conference Center.

GCAR officials say the centralized appointment service would reduce the amount of time Realtors spend arranging meetings. But some real estate agents question whether the Colonie-based organization should make such a large investment at a time when the region's housing market is in a slump.

A Central Showing informational packet from June states that appointment services could begin for GCAR members as early as Sept. 30. It could cost agents \$17.75 per month.

"If I have to show five properties, now I have to call five different people and wait for five phone calls. ... Three's a frustration level when I try to get an appointment and I can't get in touch with the agent," said Miguel Berger, who heads GCAR's technology committee and owns Tech Valley Homes in Albany.

With Central Showing, Realtors would have to call one phone number to arrange showings for multiple properties instead of having to call each property's listing agent. Centralized Showing arranges more than 15 million showings annually in more than 40 U.S. markets. The nearest New York Realtor group that offers Centralized Showing's services is on Staten Island.

Centralized Showing would also establish a showings database, which would detail the number of showings that have happened in a neighborhood and the price ranges of buyers. Right now, most local home pricing data have been limited to sellers' sale prices, according to Berger.

"I think that's a tremendous advantage for the seller," Berger said.

GCAR Chief Executive Officer James Ader said the adoption of the appointment center would be the group's most important new service since its rollout of an electronic key system. That system allows listing agents to store electronic keys for showing agents in electronic lock boxes at properties. It eliminated the need for agents to drive to other agents to secure keys for properties they wanted to show.

GCAR's board of directors will meet next month, though it is not clear whether officials will vote on the appointment center issue. Even if GCAR directors approve the service, Ader does not expect it to give sluggish sales a jolt. During the first half of this year, closed single-family home sales throughout the greater Capital Region were down 17 percent, compared with the same period of 2007.

"It's not a marketing tool. It's a personal assistance tool that lets you go out and do more work," Ader said.

Given the market's softness, Ader acknowledged that the proposed service might not come at the best time for some agents.

Schenectady Realtor Doreen Ross was especially concerned about the approximately \$200 the service would tack onto her GCAR membership fee.

"The timing of this couldn't be worse. If they did this five years ago when we had a top market, maybe we wouldn't complain about it," said Ross, a 37-year industry veteran who runs Doreen Ross Associates.

Merry Sparano, a Coldwell Banker Realtor in Guelderland, said she opposes the Centralized Showing proposal. She said she would not use the call service but she would still have to pay for it. Sparano's office has a call coordinator who fields appointment requests for Coldwell agents, but she prefers to personally handle most of those calls.

"It takes the personal part out of the picture," Sparano said of Centralized Showing.