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This month Main Street looks into the impact that swimming pools have on buying, selling, and maintaining residential properties. To our surprise not everyone wants a pool and realtors seldom advise putting in a new pool to sell a house.

Buyers want pools, but they don't want to pay for them

“To weekend buyers looking for a dream of chilling out, a pool is at the top of the wish list. Right along with privacy, lots of light, and a view,” said Graham Klemm of Klemm Real Estate. But he also advises potential sellers to hold off on installing a pool to make the property more marketable. “You might build the wrong pool, or put it in the wrong place. It may make the property less attractive to potential buyers starting a family or with small children. Older couples typical don't want the maintenance of pools.”

The overwhelming realtor consensus is only put in a pool to enjoy yourself. Recouping your cost is very uncertain, especially in our area with limited swimming days. This isn't Florida.

Elyse Harney of Elyse Harney Real Estate summed it up well: “In general, although Lakeville Lake is the deepest natural lake in Connecticut and a wonderful place to swim, having a private pool is always an asset, but never a determining factor in buying a property.”

From the buyer's perspective having an existing pool also means the pool will be included in the overall value and appraisal of the property for



financing purposes. There's no need to take out a separate loan of \$75,000 to \$100,000 to build, landscape, and fence a new 20' by 40' gunite pool. But it is important to have a special inspection for any existing pool and to check out the pool and equipment warranties.

For houses at the very high-end, buyers tend to expect a pool. When Pat Best renovated a neglected Greek revival home on Belgo Road she included a pool, but the buyer can decide on the finishing touches. “We felt that it was important to install a pool for this type of estate property. We kept it simple and symmetrical to go with the classical lines of the house and adjacent carriage house. The buyer can do the fun part of landscaping to their taste, but they won't have to deal with a big mess in their backyard and can use it this summer.”

Renters on the other hand are very willing to pay more for a pool. Harney estimated that a house on Belgo Road in Salisbury, CT, which has been rented for three summers for \$55,000, would bring only half that amount without a pool (see photo). At that rate a pool could pay for itself in several years.

Installing a pool? How long? How much?

If you are considering buying a house and building a new pool check with a pool builder to make certain you have

space, including setbacks from wells and septic, and appropriate soil.

Jim Dobson of Dobson Pools, who has built over 3,000 pools, recalls that one in one hundred locations have rocks that make pool installation impossible. He also estimated that only one of three clients consulted with a pool professional before buying a property. Architect Jimmy Crisp says that pools present a design challenge and that clients should always consult on location. “Remember that pools aren't attractive in the winter.”

A bare bones classic 20' by 40' gunite pool will cost about \$40,000 and the average is \$75,000, according to Dobson who enjoys being in the pool business. “A pool is a luxury product that makes people happy.”

Architect Jimmy Crisp observed that vinyl costs much less at \$20,000 to \$30,000, but that the liner has to be changed every five years at a cost of \$5,000. “People don't really ask for them.” Klemm believes that, “No one around here considers vinyl. This is a sophisticated place.”

It takes only about three weeks to get the pool itself installed, but add additional time for landscaping, pool houses, etc. Timing is important and in a strong economy quality pool builders are already backed up for this summer.

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Swimming pool report

Above: The pool beside this barn house is appropriately secured with stonewalls and farm fencing. Photo courtesy of Graham Klemm of Klemm Real Estate. Below, left: There will be no more drinks in this pool. The owners opted to remove the pool after three summers. Photo courtesy of Ed Stillman.

Today's trends in pool design

Like everything else, there are trends in pools. All ozone or salt-water pools seem to be preferred over standard chlorine because of lower chemical costs and better water feel, observed Crisp. Pool shapes have evolved from rectangular to free-form organic curves in the 1970s and 1980s, and back to rectangular. New pools are often gray tinted gunite resulting in a dark moody look instead of Caribbean blue. Besides seeming more natural, the dark color by itself raises the temperature of the pool five to seven degrees.

Indoor pools, which were popular at the end of the last century, can actually be a deterrent to sale because of moisture and humidity, not to mention the chlorine smell. Sunning shelves in the shallow end of the pool, jumping rocks instead of diving boards, and under water benches are popular additions today, while infinity edges, according to Jim Dobson, have already peaked – unless there is a spectacular view. Overall the trend is towards natural materials and pools that fit into the landscape.

Property taxes, insurance, and the ongoing costs of pool maintenance

Tri-state assessors all approach assessing the value of an in-ground swimming pool differently. In Massachusetts, assessors like Tammy Blackwell in Sheffield, consult Core Logic (formerly known as Marshall & Swift cost tables) to determine the assessed value of a pool depending on its size and material. For example the weekender standard of a 20' by 40' gunite pool added \$43,600 last year to a home's taxable value. "It's treated like any other attached structure and we add on the pool house and other associated improvements. A fiberglass pool 15' by 44' only added \$13,400 to the assessed value of another property despite its cost of \$64,000.

New York assessors will inspect the pool in person and typically add more to the assessment than the actual cost of a pool. And your assessment is

reduced if your pool is filled in. Note that hot tubs won't add extra to your assessment because they are considered personal property.

In Salisbury, CT, expect an increase of 6% to 11% of your property's value. The amount depends on the value it adds to the house in the experience of the assessor, Kayla Jonson. "Pools contribute more to the value of an expensive house. If the pool also has an elaborate pool house with a cabana, a kitchen, and shower that really adds up." For a recent addition of a pool in Salisbury the assessor added \$75,000 for the pool, and \$24,000 for the pool house. "And a view from the pool can really increase the assessment value." On the other hand a pool at the lower end of the market could actually decrease the value of the property. To get a handle on the property tax situation, it is best to consult with your town's assessor first.

The insurance cost for adding a pool was a shocker. The pool itself will add a very small amount to your property insurance premium. This would cover, for example, a deer jumping over the fence and ruining the pool's vinyl liner. But anyone buying a house with a pool or contemplating installing a pool should make certain that there is ample liability insurance. Kirk Kneller of Brad Peck Insurance Agency in Copake, NY, describes pools as "an attractive nuisance." In his experience pool liability claims are always big claims. Think of plaintiffs attorney John Edwards who won \$25,000,000 in a single case of a defective drain cover. The good news is that substantial liability coverage can be added without great expense.

Linda Robertson of Founders Insurance in Lakeville, CT, added that the value of the pool and any pool structures may be included in the 10% "other structures" provision. Most insurance companies also have provisions limiting diving boards, requiring above ground pools to remove ladders when not in use, specifying fence heights and locks, self-locking covers on drains, and pool covers.

The cost of maintaining a pool is difficult to estimate because it depends on the size, type, and location of the pool. It might be \$75 a week or a \$150. One pool maintenance



Above, top to bottom: This pool with a view doubled the estimated summer rent of this house on Belgo Road. Photo courtesy of Elyse Harney Real Estate. Indoor lap pools can be attractive to serious swimmers. Photo courtesy of John Harney.

professional explained that he services pools ranging in size from 6,000 gallons to 150,000 gallons. Good pool service providers are on call 24/7, especially on weekends, to get the heater started back up, repair a drain, etc. Opening the pool and closing a pool for the season are additional. *But* the big expenses are the energy costs of running the pump and heating the pool, at least a \$1,000 a year for an average sized pool. All of the annual expenses probably add up to \$5,000 to \$7,000 a year.

One recent buyer in the Village of Millerton made the decision to remove the pool because of the costs of maintenance. "When we were house hunting 'No Pool' was actually a line item on the wish list. But buying a house always requires compromise, and when we found a great house on a nice piece of property in a great location, we looked past the fact that it had a pool. The pool was forty years old, pre-dating the house. We agreed to keep the pool for as long as it required only regular maintenance and re-think things when it needed more serious money. After three laborious seasons of keeping the pool up, it

became clear that future use would require thousands of dollars: a new liner, replacing the pump and filter, and finding and fixing a leak somewhere in the plumbing – and that's before any expense of integrating the old pool into the landscaping, which the previous owner never bothered with. So last fall, instead of closing the pool for the season, we had one last dip, and then the backhoe closed the pool for good."

If you are considering installing a pool on your property gather the pertinent information. Speak to your local tax assessor, check out the zoning rules with your town's building inspector and zoning officials, discuss it with your real estate agent, mention it to your insurance agent, have an architect help site the pool location and get a cost estimate from your preferred pool contractor, pool maintenance company, and other trades. The best idea is to start in the fall and reserve a time with your pool contractor so you can swim next summer. ●