



Published on *Inman News* (<http://www.inman.com>)

## 5 tips for choosing a neighborhood

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Created 2010-08-18 01:00

You're not just buying a house -- you're also buying a neighborhood. Sometimes, though, one resident's "neighborhood glories" are another resident's "neighborhood warts."



Flickr photo courtesy of [Mark Strozier](#) [1].

Take, for example, close proximity to clubs and nightlife.

For some homebuyers, that would be a turnoff. But a few years ago, Austin, Texas, broker Kimbrough Gray had clients who insisted on being "stumbling distance" from a particular bar.

"They said, 'We don't want to drive after we've gone to our favorite club,' " Gray said. "I'd show them houses, and they'd say, 'If we were drunk, could we find our way home to this house?' "

His clients ended up being happy with their eventual choice. But how is a stranger to a community expected to know the difference between "too close" and "too far"? Or how to know, like Gray's clients, which neighborhood features are truly critical to their personal needs?

Five things to consider when picking a neighborhood:

**1. The time of day when you first lay eyes on a prospective house can affect your impression of the neighborhood**, so visit at various hours.

"A neighborhood can be totally different at night," said Gray, who has blogged about factors affecting neighborhood choice at [Escapesomewhere.com](#), the website of his brokerage, Vox Real Estate. "If you go somewhere at 1:30 p.m., it may seem OK, but if you go back at night, it (could seem) a bit more sketchy."

The same can be said for neighborhood traffic congestion, which can change dramatically at rush hour -- or traffic on a Saturday can be a different story than on a Tuesday, he said.

**2. Neighborhood choice can be a pocketbook issue, and not just because of house prices and property taxes.** Commuting costs -- of both time and money -- are critical.

"I'm a Realtor, but we also do a lot of investing, so we move around a lot," Gray said. "I always calculate (in a buying decision) how much I'm going to spend on gas when I'm commuting.

"I've had clients say, 'This house is \$10 cheaper on the mortgage (than another house),' but I've had to tell them, 'Yes, but this one is going to cost you \$80 more in gas.' "

**3. Ask questions of people who already live there.**

The locals usually freely offer their opinions of neighborhood safety, noise, school performance, commuting times, etc., he said.

"When I'm dealing with a condo association, I usually stand outside the building and wait to chat with somebody who's just walking around," Gray said. "But I've had clients who will go around and knock on doors."

**4. The Internet can be a boon for researching the nitty-gritty.**

[NeighborhoodScout.com](#) [2], for example, is a subscription service that offers in-depth looks at such considerations as crime statistics (for 17,000 law-enforcement jurisdictions), school-performance data, and quarterly price-appreciation records of area homes.

It's customizable: The site can do such things as take the characteristics of a neighborhood that's familiar to you and approximate similar neighborhoods in other cities. For retirees, it can narrow down neighborhoods that have, say, a large population of educated seniors.

And coming soon, the site says, is a "build your neighborhood" feature in which users enter home-price range, crime-level comfort, preferred school scores, etc., to come up with suggested areas.

The service costs \$29.99 a month, or \$14.99 a month for a six-month subscription.

**5. Some neighborhood characteristics can be hard to cram into numerical categories or scores.** [NabeWise.com](#) [3] has taken 65 "quality of life" characteristics and set them up as criteria for neighborhood-hunters.

For example, you can actually search for "trendy" neighborhoods -- or "clean" ones. Perhaps you want to live around liberals or around conservatives. Maybe you want to be near a farmers market or public transit or nightlife. The user just needs to fill out a checklist.

The site also features photo tours of neighborhoods and reviews from locals. Currently, it covers only New York City, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle and Chicago; Los Angeles is in the works, the company says.

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