

COVERSTORY

LI Real Estate 5

FINDING A HOME'S HIDDEN DEFECTS

Buyers can go beyond the typical inspection to uncover problems

BY STACEY ALTHERR
Special to Newsday

Smart prospective homebuyers know a house inspection is an important part of the experience. A good inspector will let a buyer know if the house has defects and what it may take to fix them: foundation cracks, missing asphalt roof tiles, and heating systems are just a few items included in a detailed home inspection report.

"I don't insist, but I encourage," said Dee Dee Brix, a North Shore real estate broker, of hiring a house inspector before buying. "Some buyers bring in a contractor instead. I think it is wise."

But no matter how detailed a report, hidden defects can cost an unsuspecting buyer thousands of dollars and time-sucking aggravation that fall outside the home inspection.

"Any part of a home inspection is visual," said Rob Byrne, owner of Higher Elevation Home and Commercial Inspections LLC, and who teaches continuing education for home inspectors. "We can't see what

is hidden behind walls."

According to home inspectors, insurance companies are demanding the reports, so they know if the roof will last, for instance.

"It's a new thing," said Byrne, whose company does about 700 inspections a year. "The insurance companies want to know what they are insuring."

But what is not covered? It may be surprising to homeowners what cannot be seen, or what is outside the detailed report.

INSIDE THE HOME WATER DAMAGE

Although Long Island is known for its scenic water views, water can be perilous for homes.

"Water is the enemy to the house," Byrne said.

Flooding from the street, low elevation of a home, improper sloping of the landscape toward the house instead of away and groundwater rising through the basement or crawl space can be both a financial burden and a health concern because of mold. Groundwater saturates the land and can seep



Rob Byrne of Higher Elevation Home Inspections inspects the crawl space of a Huntington Station home.

through foundations.

Inspectors can see a lot, but not all.

"The most important tool is our eyes and nose," Byrne said. "You can smell it. But you can't see behind walls."

However, most home inspection companies, including Byrne's company, use thermal imaging and moisture meters. If metal columns are rusted at the bottom, it may be from past water damage; another sign.

Talking to neighbors about the history of water damage on the street also may be helpful.

A town hall's planning department may be able to tell prospective buyers if a home is in a groundwater flood zone.

BURIED OLD OIL TANKS

A large concern on Long Island is homes with buried oil tanks. Sometimes one can tell there was a tank in the ground by looking at where the lines connect. And that won't show if it has been "abandoned," that is whether it has been properly emptied and filled with the required fill so it isn't an environmental hazard.

An improperly abandoned tank can leak, causing environmental contamination that could cost up to \$100,000 to remedy, because the leak could seep into a neighbor's property.



Higher Elevation's Rob Byrne inspects the basement of the Huntington Station home with Douglas Elliman's Michael Furino.

A properly abandoned tank will be registered with the Department of Health in Nassau County. Suffolk doesn't require it to be registered, said Byrne, but homeowners will usually have a certificate saying the work was done. Abandoning a tank can cost about \$4,000, he said, if there is no leakage.

ELECTRICAL

House inspectors can learn a lot about the home's electrical systems by looking at fuse and circuit breaker boxes, how light switches and outlets are working in each room, and the amp voltage in the home. But inspec-

tors cannot see inside walls.

"Older aluminum wiring, used in the mid-'60s to mid-'70s, was not a good conductor and could have issues of fire hazards and other concerns," Byrne said.

Repairs can be easy, from an outlet to an entire circuit breaker box, which can run from \$3,500 to \$5,000 for a new service. But if the home needs the aluminum wiring behind walls replaced, it can be much more.

CHIMNEYS

Many inspectors do not include chimneys in their inspections, and are not re-



A home inspection revealed past termite dirt and rot at a home in Huntington Station.



Rob Byrne documents trees and the chimney of the home.



During the inspection, Rob Byrne shows Douglas Elliman's Michael Furino a damaged floor board while Taiysha Vargas takes notes.

quired to do so, but can note if they see something wrong, such as if it is leaning or missing bricks or cement.

"If you get on the roof, you can look at the top part of the crown [of the chimney] and see something you may not see from the ground," he said. "If we can remove the chimney cap on top of the flue, we might see things from there," such as cracks in the liner of the flue.

But even then, inspectors may not see enough, and will tell prospective owners to get a chimney inspection. Severe chimney problems can typically cost up to \$10,000 for a new or

renovated chimney, he said.

ROOF

While inspectors are not required to walk on a roof, they must state if they inspected using binoculars, a drone, while standing on a ladder looking from the roof's edge or by walking on the roof.

Some roofs, such as those on Capes, may be hard to walk on, said Byrne. Still, if not inspected by walking the roof, damage such as missing tiles or flashing can be missed.

Buyers can ask how the inspection is done at the time of hiring the inspector. An inspector may

suggest hiring a roofer, and costs to repair a roof range drastically depending on amount of damage, how many roof tiles may need to be removed, and of course, square footage.

SEWER LINES

House inspectors will run water through all the home's faucets and flush all toilets to run a large amount of water through the system, both to check the pipes but also to see how the sewer system responds.

But that won't catch all problems. Depending on the age of a home, metal cast iron pipes can corrode, and large tree roots can penetrate the line, causing leaks and backups.

"We always suggest getting a sewer line scoped," Byrne said. Licensed plumbers and companies that specialize in sewers and cesspools can do this work, usually for about \$350 to \$450, Byrne said.

OUTSIDE THE HOME

Sometimes, things outside the home can affect a homeowner's quality of life more than a backed-up sewer line or deteriorating chimney. Some things are not as tangible, but just as important.

Albert Bongiorno, an agent

with Nest Seekers International's Atlantic Coast Division, said that many of these home-buying pitfalls can be found with some detective work.

"Savvy buyers should broaden their scope and consider the neighborhood dynamics and zoning regulations for a more holistic understanding of the potential investment," Bongiorno said.

ZONING — NOW AND LATER

Are there plans for a new shopping center or is an Amazon warehouse going to be built behind your house?

Among the most upsetting news for homeowners is when they discover an empty parcel of land is going to be developed and is zoned for commercial or industrial use, Bongiorno said.

"This can affect property values and desirability," he said.

Local municipalities have maps that show how each parcel is zoned. Prospective buyers can visit their town hall to find out about zoning in the surrounding area. Vacant lots don't always stay vacant; they

ON THE COVER Chris and Rob Byrne of Higher Elevation Home Inspections go through a home in Huntington Station.

are owned by someone and can be built on at any time.

"This can help anticipate how the neighborhood could change over time," he said.

NEIGHBORHOOD

Buyers may think they know the area well, but it is wise to drive through it several times at different times of the day and night. That is the best way to see if there are traffic problems or houses that often throw loud parties that may impact your quality of life.

SCHOOLS

Real estate agents are limited in what they can say regarding school ratings. Prospective buyers should inquire on their own, said Bongiorno. Asking the school for a tour to see the facility can also be helpful.

NEARBY AMENITIES

Is having a park within walking distance important? How about the quality of shopping? Is there a local house of worship that feels comfortable? Drive the area and time how long it takes to get places from your future home. Visit places around the neighborhood to see how it fits your lifestyle.

Commuters should also consider access to highways or train station distance.