Buying That Special Place in the Country
By Bill Boyd

There are many things to consider when you buy property in a rural area. These rules apply to any area but I am specifically referring to Agua Dulce and Acton.

Items of importance:

1. Location
2. Size and Usability
3. Wells
4. Septics
5. Easements
6. Zoning
7. Natural Hazards
8. Dirt roads and Propane
9. Soil, Wind, Climate and Elevation
10. Wild animals and critters

Location

Agua Dulce and Acton consist of 40 square miles. There are many different locations, some better than others. You know what they say in real estate, location, location, location. Some factors that contribute to a good location are; Less driving time, Quiet, flat usable land, Trees and Vegetation, Climate, Wind, good water and consistency of the neighborhood. There is an old saying, values are emotions. 50% of a homes value is going to be curb appeal. So find a location that creates an emotional response in you.

Size and Usability

It's not how big it is, it's how usable it is. Flat, usable ground is a premium. All of the properties in Agua Dulce and Acton are all on acreage but only a small portion are all usable.
Determine your needs and find a property accordingly. If your preference is horses, then you will put a priority on the usable ground. If your priority is privacy, then you will put more of a priority on the house and the lay of the land and not necessarily the usability.

Wells

This one is the biggy. A small amount of properties in Acton are on public water (which comes from a well) and the rest of the properties including all of Agua Dulce are on private wells. Agua Dulce has two communities that are private water companies on community wells.

We want two things; Quantity and Quality.

Quantity

Wells are rated by Gallons Per Minute (GPM). 1 gallon per minute is equal to approximately 1,500 gallons per day. If you have a well that is rated at 5 gallons per minute that is 7,500 gallons per day. That is a lot of water (depending on your needs), most wells that produce over 10 gallons per minute will only have a 10 gallon per minute pump for non commercial rural properties.

A family of 4 uses approximately 500 gallons per day for household needs including laundry
A horse uses between 25 and 50 gallons per day depending on the season.
A big tree will use approximately 5 gallons per day.
The biggest water culprits are lawns

If you had 2 kids, 4 horses and 50 trees you would use approximately 1,000 gallons per day.

Quality

Early in my real estate career, I was taught to ask for the most extensive water quality testing for my clients. In Agua Dulce and Acton the most common harmful inorganic minerals are Arsenic, Nitrates, Flourides (yes they are harmful) and total dissolved solids. I always ask for the EPA's most extensive test known as a Title 22 Water Quality Test. There are two parts to this test, items that have been determined to be a health hazard and non health hazard items. I additionally ask for Coliform bacteria also. All of these items are correctable through different filters but we want a seller to deliver a property to us with clean potable water.

These tests, both quality and quantity are a contingency of any contract I write and the Buyer may back out of the transaction if they are not to your satisfaction.

Sometimes we get lucky and run across a 100 gallon per minute well with a clean Title 22.

Septic Systems

Throughout America, millions of city dwellers take for granted that they can flush the toilet and everything in it will disappear into the sewer.

Country properties, however, usually dispose of sewage with a septic system. Through a rather unsophisticated combination of a holding tank and perforated pipes called leach lines, the sewage is absorbed (leached) into the ground. Different soils allow for the water to drain differently. Clay based soils do not leach as well as decomposed granite.

As you might imagine, there are all kinds of ways for things to go wrong with such a system. When your septic tank backs up, or your leach lines become plugged, septic tanks are no fun. That's why I always ask for the septic system to be "pumped and certified" as a contingency of the contract. As far as I'm concerned, it's mandatory to investigate a property properly and often it is a lender requirement.

A septic system inspection usually includes a visual inspection of the area around the system to look for obvious leaks. Such system failures are usually detected by visual clues of seepage and the accompanying malodorous stench. The inspection also should include pumping the contents from the tank and a visual inspection of the inside of the septic tank after the pumping is completed. This inspection should reveal any cracks or flaws in the tank itself. If the system is in good working order, you should receive a written certification stating the results of the inspection.

Septic tanks are made from different materials; Concrete, Metal and Plastic. Metal has only a 15 year lifespan and plastic can collapse if not installed properly. Concrete is the way to go. A properly installed concrete tank, in a soil that leaches properly and is pumped every couple of years can almost be maintenance free and should last very long.

Easements

When you buy a house in town, the easements are usually fairly obvious; CC&R's, utility lines, alleys, shared fences and driveways. On rural properties it is very important to investigate for;

That your property has deeded access from the nearest dedicated road.

Neighboring properties having access through your land.

Shared wells.

Deed restrictions

Mineral rights, surface entry and non surface entry.

Restricted building areas.

I will guide you through the process of analyzing any matters of record in the Preliminary Title report. I always ask the Title Company to also provide all documentation for any matters of record and provide a copy of all color coded easements on a plot map.

Zoning

In the majority of Agua Dulce and Acton, 95% of all properties are zoned Agricultural. There are two kinds of Agricultural zoning, A-1 and A-2. It has nothing to do with the amount of dwellings, it pertains to the use. The major difference between A-1 and A-2 is that on A-2 you can have a pubic horse boarding facility and you can also have a dog kennel. All of your other horse uses are the same. You can have 8 horses per acre in either zoning but you can only have 3 dogs without a kennels license. If peace and quiet is your priority then you might want to stay to A-1 so you won't have a kennel next to you. If you want to breed your favorite dog then you need A-2.

Natural Hazards

All Sellers of properties in California that transfer title must provide a Natural Hazards disclosure to the new Buyer. Customarily, a seller pays a third party company to provide that information and the third party is liable for it's accuracy. I also recommend that you go to the local building department and regional planning to investigate the subject property. Sometimes the local building departments will be more strict than the records the third party has referenced. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

Common sense applies to your visual inspection of the subject property, looking for items such as; a wash that could be a potential flood hazard, abundance of rocks that might make grading difficult, potential slide areas and unstable soil.

Dirt Roads and Propane

Many properties in the Agua Dulce and Acton area are on dirt roads. That usually means the property uses bottled gas (Propane). There are some pros and cons. The good news is that you now have the opportunity to get rid of unwanted in-laws and fairweather friends because they won't want to get their cars dirty.

Pros;

Privacy, away from the maddening crowds

More wild animals for your viewing pleasure

Properties are less expensive on a dirt road

More trails to ride if you are into horses or motorcycles.

Cons;

You will be a regular customer at the car wash

You need to be concerned with road maintenance

Your car will require more maintenance

Propane costs more to heat.

Dusty, if you are close to the road

Soil, Wind, Climate and Elevation.

Soils

Decomposed granite is the best. It drains the best, it is the best soil for compaction, earthquakes and there is minimum dust. Clay based soils do not allow your septic systems to perk and if you walk on it when it is muddy you will get two inches taller. Expandable soils and river bottom soils will be more liquefiable and not fair well when it comes to compaction or earthquakes. When it comes to soils, always think DG.

Wind

Some areas have more wind than others. Generally, the higher you get, the more the wind. Many people want to build on top of a hill so they will get the best view but the top of the hill will have more wind. If stunning view is your preference, then it is better to be a little ways down from the top of the hill so the wind will not be so strong. Certain areas are wind corridors and always have wind the same time every day. When you find a property you are considering, I highly recommend that you check it out at different times of the day to see how the wind conditions are.

Climate and Elevation.

The higher the elevation, the colder you are in the winter but the cooler you are in the summer. Between Agua Dulce and Acton, you have a elevation difference that runs from approximately 2,500 feet to 3,800 feet. The building department uses 3,500 feet as their measurement to require snow loads on structures. So it is important that you find out what elevation you are at. Some people are more comfortable higher elevations and some people are more comfortable at lower ones. It is good to know your options.

Wild Animals and Critters

One of my favorite subjects. I've lived in a rural environment for the last 35 years and enjoying wild animals is a big part of my life. Do not feed wild animals, except for birds, they will be back for more and cause problems. The most prevalent animals you will see in Agua Dulce and Acton are; Quail, Hawks, Owls, Roadrunners, Ravens, rabbits, Squirrels, Gophers, Mice, Rats, Bats, Lizards, Snakes, Raccoons, Coyotes, Deer and an occasional bobcat.

The birds are fun to watch. The quail make their little noises as the cruise along in a line with momma in the front and daddy bringing up the rear. The hawks and owls are very majestic but the ravens are the real characters. The ravens are the smartest bird in the western United States, they just have a bad rap because they are carrion birds. Just figure they are the garbage collectors. They mate for life and whenever you see a large group of Ravens, that is a social gathering. You can tell I am a fan of the Ravens.

Ground squirrels, gophers, rabbits, rats and mice are a major pain in the rear but I guess they serve their purpose. Having house cats is really a benefit when it comes to rodents but you need to keep them inside at night so the coyotes will leave them alone. You need to cage all of your small trees, plants and your garden because the rabbits, squirrels and gophers will love to eat them. The best way to get rid of gophers is to put bubble gum down their hole. Once they eat it, no more gophers. When I first bought my property in Acton I had a problem with the rabbits and squirrels eating my plants so I went to the Wildlife Waystation, gave them a donation and drove away with a whole truck load of Lion and Tiger #@&*. I spread that around my plants and Wa La!!!, I did not see a rabbit or a squirrel for at least a year. I must have gave them a heart attack thinking there was a big cat in the neighborhood. It almost gave me one looking at those maneaters while I loaded up my truck.

Coyotes. I like coyotes but they do not get along very well with your domestic animals. They are very fearful of humans and they will run from you. They are just wild dogs looking for a bite to eat but it might be your cats, chickens or small dogs. Usually if you have a pair of medium size dogs they will keep the coyotes away, a good fence helps also. They don't like to be in the spotlight so, motion detectors that turn on lights helps to keep them away. I have one of those big Maglight flashlights that will shine across the canyon and whenever I shine it on the coyotes they leave. I would rather listen to the coyotes howling at night than the sirens and noises in town.

Snakes, you either love them or hate them. The non poisonous one are very good to have around to keep the rodents down but you have to get used to them. Learn how to tell the difference between a rattlesnake and other snakes. Some of the gopher snakes will coil and act like a rattlesnake to try and con you, remember, the rattlesnake has a diamond shape head and the non poisonous ones have a round head. You need to not panic when you see one (yeah right) because if you give them room they will do everything they can to get away from you. In my living in Acton for over twenty years, I have seen three rattlesnakes on my property. Educate yourself on how to deal with rattlesnakes and please don't kill the good snakes. Snakes are defensive, they will only strike when they feel they are threatened.

And then we have the beautiful arrogant Bobcat. You want to observe them from a distance, they can be dangerous if cornered. But what a thrill to look out your window and see one walking on your property. They are not that prevalent, so if you see one, consider yourself lucky.

Remember, use some common sense when dealing with wild animals. Living close to them can be fun. We have several animal rescue places in our area so, if you need a tax write off, consider an animal rescue. It is a good place to see your money well spent.

Call me before you consider purchasing a property in the country. My knowledge can be a benefit to you

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