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Faking the deed: How land scams are becoming the real estate industry's new plague

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Sarah Lang

Manchester, NH In a world increasingly fraught with scams, few industries are as vulnerable as real estate. Fraudulent land transactions have become a growing menace, with scammers using sophisticated tactics to exploit unsuspecting buyers and sellers. The New Hampshire Association of Realtors (NHAR) has reported a rise in scams where fraudsters impersonate property owners to sell vacant land, posing serious risks not just to buyers, but to real estate professionals as well, who could be held liable for promoting fraudulent listings. In 2022 alone, real estate fraud accounted for over \$396 million in losses, with vacant land often serving as prime bait for fraudsters.

Fortunately, there are local heroes stepping up to protect property owners and their rights. Sarah Lang, associate broker at Jbo Home is one such guardian. With her sharp eye for red flags and unwavering commitment to her clients, Lang has made it her mission to shield landowners from scams.

The Case of the Vanishing Owner

Recently, Lang encountered a suspicious situation that showcased the importance of vigilance. A man claiming to own land in New Hampshire contacted her, insisting on a quick sale. He claimed he was undergoing medical treatment, didn't care about the sale price, and needed the deal finalized immediately. There was a lingering doubt about the seller's urgency that didn't sit well.

Rather than rushing into the transaction, Lang leaned on the extensive training she had gathered from associations like The Greater Manchester/Nashua Board of Realtors, her brokerage fraud/scam training and her partnership with Cohen Closing & Title to verify the seller's identity. Using CertifID, a powerful tool exclusive to real estate agents and their clients, Lang initiated a verification process.

The results were telling. The email sent to confirm the deed's ownership went unopened, and follow-up communications were ignored. Recognizing the telltale signs of a scam, she acted swiftly, refusing to move forward and effectively stopping the fraudster in their tracks, ultimately saving this unsuspecting landowner from being a victim of fraud.

"Scammers prey on desperation and convenience," Lang said. "It's easy to get caught up in their stories, but due diligence is non-negotiable. Agents aren't just here to help you buy or sell property; we're the guardians of your property and rights."

Protecting Landowners with Knowledge and Tools

Lang's expertise comes from years of experience and a dedication to rigorous verification protocols. CertifID, allows agents and title companies to confirm the identities of property owners securely, ensuring that transactions are legitimate before they proceed.

Collaborating closely with trusted partners, whose vigilance and expertise play a crucial role in preventing fraudulent transactions before they can cause damage, is essential in the real estate industry.

"Having the right partners makes all the difference," Lang said. "Together, we protect clients and

preserve the integrity of the real estate industry.”

Spotting the Red Flags

Lang emphasizes that recognizing the signs of a scam is critical. Here are common tactics used by land scammers:

1. Sellers claiming to be out of state and unreachable in person.
2. Land priced significantly below market value.
3. Push for quick sales with limited verification.
4. Insistence on using their own notary or title company.
5. Resistance to involving licensed Realtors.

Agents as Guardians of Property Rights

Real estate professionals are on the front lines, ensuring scams don't victimize buyers or sellers. With tools like CertifID, partnerships with reputable title companies, and a steadfast commitment to their clients, agents play a crucial role in safeguarding property rights.

Lang's advice to landowners is simple: "Trust the process and rely on experienced agents. We're here not just to close deals but to protect you from becoming a victim."

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