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Coronavirus forces many residential agents to go virtual

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It's not unusual for [Tina Bacci](#) to lease apartments sight unseen. As a leasing agent with The Abbey Group in Boston, she represents a number of properties just outside the Longwood Medical Area, and often rents to new medical residents using photos and videos instead of in-person tours.

Realtors and leasing agents historically have depended on open houses and personal tours to connect with clients and make a sale. But as the coronavirus pandemic has swept in and upended daily life across the world, it's forcing the residential real estate industry to go virtual.

"Right now, we are doing sight unseen on everything," Bacci said. "It's a matter of making the accommodations for what makes that person comfortable."

Many luxury residential buildings have shuttered common amenity areas, such as gyms, roof decks and game rooms, which are often a big selling point for potential buyers or renters.

Boston Mayor [Martin J. Walsh](#) last week issued a letter to the Greater Boston real-estate community discouraging open houses and requesting that landlords, Realtors and rental brokers limit in-person showings "to the greatest extent possible." Instead, they should use photos, videos and written descriptions, he said.

"We realize that there is a need for business to continue but we also need to recognize the extraordinary circumstances of this situation," Walsh's letter said.

Reaction from the brokerage community to Walsh's letter has been mixed, according to [Jason Gell](#), CEO of The BLP Team, Keller Williams Cambridge. Gell, who serves as president of the Greater Boston Association of Realtors, said GBAR and the Greater Boston Real Estate Board were able to share input with the mayor's office as the Walsh administration crafted the letter.

"There are certainly people that were taking this very seriously, and were doing their very best to come up with some policies," Gell said. "However, it was challenging, when there are other companies and offices or even agents ... less understanding of the current atmosphere, and not taking similar precautions. It was leading to a bit of a disjointed playing field."

Limiting showings and personal interaction is a tough call for many agents, many of whom generate income via commission. And in such a competitive industry, one agent turning down a showing might hand another agent a sale.

But the need for safety and promoting public health is paramount, said [Antonio Khoury](#) and [Brett DeRocker](#), Realtors with DeRocker & Khoury of Compass in Boston. The team has stopped holding open houses, and has seen more interest from buyers calling to request virtual tours.

"The new showing is going to become a conversation over the phone," DeRocker said. "They can become conversations via FaceTime to do tours."

Of course, it's one thing to lease an apartment for a year without first seeing it. It's another to agree to a decades-long mortgage without setting foot in the property. But the DeRocker & Khoury team just had a client put in an offer to purchase a



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Tina Bacci is the leasing agent for many of The Abbey Group's properties near Longwood Medical Center in Boston's Fenway neighborhood, and is used to doing "sight unseen" leases for new medical residents using photos or videos. She captures details at the Viridian, an apartment complex at 1282 Boylston St.

South End unit — sight unseen.

“It does happen,” he said. “But it is a little more rare.”

All of the projects in The Collaborative Co.’s portfolio — including Hub50House and Lovejoy Wharf near North Station, EchelonSeaport, and the forthcoming Raffles Residences — have temporarily halted in-person tours and moved to virtual appointments.

Laura Pierce, vice president of sales and marketing with TCC in Boston, has set up virtual appointments with clients, through Microsoft Teams, to walk them through sales and leasing centers, show a 360-degree view of the homes, and look at virtual renderings.

“That’s been a really impactful resource for us,” Pierce said. “That’s huge for us, when you can’t see and touch and feel stuff. This is something that we can connect with the individual potential buyers and give them something that they can see.”

Matt Dolan, a Realtor with Sagan Harborside Sotheby’s International Realty in Marblehead, has also reduced and canceled some open houses, and has done showings via FaceTime.

“You don’t need some crazy technology. You just need a smartphone and a good attitude,” Dolan said.

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