



A Free Tool to Fight Property Fraud

I encourage you to sign up today and urge all of your clients who own real estate to do the same.



Realtor Rod Banks' assistant made a startling discovery last year at a vacant Valrico home he had listed for sale. Someone had moved in.

Xenia McBroom was on a routine inspection at the Diamond Hills home when she made the discovery. "She called me and I was just shocked," Banks recalls. The \$300,000 house in the gated community had sheets in the windows for curtains. Once he determined that someone really was living there, Banks called the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office.

The ensuing investigation would uncover an alleged scheme involving two so-called sovereign citizens who believe the laws of Florida do not apply to them. Both were charged with property fraud, but the mess they left behind has occupied Banks for more than 18 months. The buyer backed out, and the bank that owned the property spent six months clearing the title, ultimately selling the home to another buyer for a lesser price. And Banks is still waiting to be repaid for the expenses he incurred.

"It's really annoying and no one wins in the end," Banks said.

As this case shows, property fraud is expensive and all too common. If it can happen to a bank, it can happen to anyone. It happened to Banks not once, but twice. A second home he had listed also was targeted by a scammer in a similar scheme.

But there is help to avoid falling victim to such scams. A free serviced offered by Hillsborough County Clerk of Court & Comptroller Pat Frank can protect property owners by alerting them to any official document recorded in their name.

Not only is it free, it takes less than a minute to subscribe online. Go to hillsclerk.com and click on the box labeled Property Fraud Alert. Simply follow the instructions to subscribe.

Once you subscribe, you will be alerted whenever a property-related document is recorded in your name. You can be alerted by e-mail, text message, or phone. The alerts cover a wide range of documents, including deeds, liens, mortgages, or legal notices related to any property you own.

"If you receive an alert about activity not initiated by you, this early notification can provide valuable time to stop criminals in their tracks," said Clerk of Court & Comptroller Pat Frank. "I encourage you to sign up today."

Receiving a property fraud alert does not mean you have been victimized. Most transactions are legitimate. You will be able to quickly determine whether a document is legitimate, and if it is not, you can alert authorities to investigate. Reviewing your property records is an important way to protect yourself from fraud. It can also uncover errors.

You can receive alerts that track documents by your name, or any variation of your name, as well as the name of a business. It is similar to the kind of alert you might receive from a bank about unusual activities involving your account. Knowing about it quickly can make a big difference.

Realtor Banks was unaware of the service until recently. He is now a subscriber and will encourage all of his clients to become subscribers too. He is also including a link to sign up in every work email he sends. "I am happy to help the public and put a clamp on these criminals," he said.

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