

Do's and Don'ts: Neighbor Relations

Most of us have to deal with neighbors. Unlike communities of 100 years ago, our neighbors are less likely to be family members and other people like us. These days, a neighborhood can be made up of people from various ethnic and economic backgrounds, recent immigrants and established families. You'd probably be surprised how far common sense and simple manners can go toward keeping up good neighbor relations. In addition, there are laws that govern many of the ways we use our residential property and how we relate to our neighbors

THE DO's

DO think about your neighbors and whether the way that you use your property will affect them. What's the view like from across the street? Can the people in the house behind you hear your son's band practicing in your garage?

DO check your title, your deed, applicable restrictive covenants, local zoning ordinances, and state laws before you build, expand, demolish, or remodel your property. Your neighbors have the right to your compliance with the law.

DO investigate what your community has to offer. There are many private and governmental organizations that are there to help communities run smoothly. Such organizations offer anything from legal information to conflict resolution programs to home improvement financing.

DO communicate with your neighbors. If you're thinking about building a fence between your property and your neighbor's, start talking about it now. Neighbors who know what's going on are more likely to be supportive of projects that affect them and more likely to cooperate if problems arise.

DO get to know your neighbors, and consider starting a community program such as neighborhood watch or an annual block party. Neighbors who are paying attention to what's happening around them can help prevent crime and neighborhood decline.

DO know where your property boundary lines are and respect them. Many of your rights as a property owner end at your property line.

DO seek the support of your neighbors when you want to make a big change. Most zoning boards are amenable to nonconforming uses or imposition or waiver of zoning laws if the whole neighborhood consents.

THE DON'Ts

DON'T hurry to file a lawsuit over every little problem. Many communities have good community mediation programs that provide an efficient, economical, and friendly way to resolve conflicts.

DON'T put up with discourteous neighbors, though. Odds are, if your next-door neighbor's late-night parties are bothering you, they are bothering your other neighbors, as well. There are laws, such as zoning laws, that govern noise levels and activities that are allowed or prohibited in your area. Sometimes the best solution is to file a lawsuit.

DON'T forget small-claims court. If the problem with your neighbor results in a lawsuit, think about reducing the amount of money you're demanding. Most small-claims courts have a limit on the amount of money at stake in each case. It might be worth your while to lower your demand in exchange for the convenience of having your problem resolved in a small-claims court.

DON'T hesitate to seek legal advice. Asking a lawyer for help doesn't necessarily mean you will end up in court or with a huge legal bill. Your lawyer can give you good advice about your rights and responsibilities with regard to your neighbors, often preventing problems before they arise.

<http://realestate.findlaw.com/neighbors/home-neighbors-overview.html>