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The good, the bad and the ugly in rental season

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On Real Estate

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There's less than a month to go before Chicago's traditional moving madness day, Oct. 1. Aside from thinking about where they're going to get that rental truck on the same day that half the metropolitan area also is trying to move, here are a few other considerations for renters:

You're a tenant. You also have a dog or a cat. They used to be mutually exclusive situations, that is, landlords were known for banishing pets from apartments. That began to change a few years ago when landlords caught on to the reality that pet ownership is huge in this country: 39 percent of U.S. households own at least one dog, and 33 percent of households own at least one cat, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

But finding the pet-friendly apartment still can take some doing. A few sites have popped up in recent years to help renters find them. The latest is [PetFriendlyRentalProperties.com](#), which has been introduced by Rhona Sutter, a Floridian who seemed to hit a pet-owning nerve a few years ago when she founded [PetRealtyNetwork.com](#), which matches animal lovers with like-minded real estate agents.

"We've gotten so many requests for (pet-friendly) rentals for people who have lost their homes through foreclosure," she said. "I think it's heartbreaking that people just can't find homes for their pets, and they're having to surrender them to shelters."

The rental site is so new that it has very few listings. To jump-start the site, Sutter is contacting real estate companies to let them know that pet-friendly rental properties they represent can be listed for free, initially anyway, on the site.

Squabbling with your roommates over whether each of them has forked over their share of the rent on time? Maybe you can acquire the services of a neutral bookkeeper.

[WilliamPaid.com](#), a Northbrook-based online rent-payment company, recently rolled out a "Group Pay" feature, which allows each roommate to schedule their payment (by credit card, debit or other means), with alerts being sent to the other roommates to let them know who has paid. It sends the collective payment on to the landlord.

The recent, feverishly reported pronouncement that Chicago ranks No. 5 in one extermination company's nationwide bedbug count reminds us that though most people think of bedbugs as a hotel phenomenon, the critters aren't that fussy about where they take up residence. They like apartments too.

BedbugRegistry.com is a database of 20,000 locations around the country where posters claim to have sighted bedbugs. The lists include rental buildings that it suggests you might want to avoid if you're seeking an apartment. Please note, however, that the site points out it can't verify whether the reports are accurate or even up-to-date. It also has a process for disputing or removing addresses from the database.

Maybe you'll always be a tenant. In addition to a recently released report from Trulia.com that one-fourth of renters think they'll never be homeowners, there comes a bit of economic reassurance: Renting is cheaper, at least by one account.

The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that in 2009 the nation's homeowners paid a median \$1,000 in overall monthly housing-related costs, compared with \$808 for renters. However, the report also said that renters usually paid a higher percentage of their household incomes on housing costs than owners did, 31 percent versus 20 percent.

This is, of course, part of a dispute that never ends, depending on which branch of the housing industry you're rooting/lobbying for. The rental industry and the homeownership proponents frequently fire statistical volleys that claim to prove theirs is the "right" way.

For instance, I recently received a study from the National Association of Realtors that asserted homeowners are happier than renters. And homeowners move less frequently than renters and are tied to their neighborhoods and communities longer, the Realtors reported. "This allows for social cohesion, ultimately resulting in stronger benefits and stronger communities," the trade group claims.

But if you're now worrying that you're letting America down by being a tenant, buck up: Although the Realtors might argue that the numbers are old now, in 1999 the National Multi Housing Council, a trade group for landlords, published data that contended that "compared to house owners, apartment residents are more socially engaged, equally involved in community groups and similarly attached to their communities and religious institutions."

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