CHARLESTON · DORCHESTER · BERKELEY COUNTY

The Lowcountry Land Selling Checklist

Fill this out before you talk to a single buyer, agent, or investor. It takes about twenty minutes and it costs nothing.

Most people who own land they want to sell have never looked up what they actually own. That puts you at a disadvantage in every conversation that follows. Work through this, and you will know more about your parcel than the last three people who mailed you a letter about it. Print it, or fill it in on your screen.

Step 1 Gather three documents

Everyone you talk to will ask for these. Having them ready moves you to the front of the line.

- [ ] **Your TMS number.** The tax map number. It is printed on your property tax bill. If you cannot find the bill, the county assessor will look it up by your name or the address. This is the single most important number you own.
- [ ] **Your recorded deed.** Whatever is on record now, in whoever's name it is in. If you inherited and nothing was ever recorded in your name, note that. It is fixable, and it is the first thing to fix.
- [ ] **Your most recent tax bill.** If you are behind, call the county tax collector and ask for the exact payoff figure, in writing.

Step 2 Your parcel at a glance

Fill in what you know. Leave blanks where you do not know yet. Step 3 will fill most of them.

TMS / PARCEL NUMBER

COUNTY

ADDRESS OR NEAREST ROAD

ACREAGE

ZONING CODE

COUNTY APPRAISED VALUE

ANNUAL PROPERTY TAX

TAXES CURRENT? Y / N

IF BEHIND, AMOUNT OWED

NAME EXACTLY AS IT APPEARS ON THE RECORDED DEED

HOW YOU CAME TO OWN IT (BOUGHT IT, INHERITED IT, DIVORCE, GIFT, DO NOT KNOW)

ANYONE ELSE WITH AN OWNERSHIP INTEREST, INCLUDING SIBLINGS AND OTHER HEIRS

Step 3 The five things that set your price

Not acreage. These five, in roughly this order. Answer each one for your parcel.

- [ ] **Can a vehicle legally get to it?**

  Not whether there is a path. Whether there is deeded, recorded access from a public road. A landlocked parcel is worth a fraction of the same parcel with frontage, and this is the most common reason tri-county land will not sell.

  ACCESS

- [ ] **Are utilities at the road?**

  Power is usually easy. Water and sewer are the expensive ones. If county water and sewer stop half a mile up the road, somebody pays to bring them, and that shows up in your price.

  UTILITIES

- [ ] **Wetlands and flood zone**

  This is the Lowcountry, so this one bites. Wetlands are not a dealbreaker on their own, but they shrink the buildable footprint, and the buildable footprint is what you are really selling.

  FLOOD ZONE

- [ ] **Zoning and minimum lot size**

  Five acres zoned one house per three acres is a different animal than five acres you could split. Call the county planning desk and ask what could be built on this TMS number. They answer that daily.

  COULD BE BUILT

- [ ] **Will it pass for septic?**

  If there is no sewer, your buyer needs an onsite wastewater permit, and that comes down to soil. South Carolina requires a soil evaluation first, and the Lowcountry is the hardest ground in the state. Note that a site can pass in a dry stretch and fail in a wet one, so "it perced years ago" is not the same as "it will permit today."

  SEWER OR SEPTIC

Step 4 The twenty minute lookup

1. **Pull your parcel on the county GIS viewer** using your TMS number. All three counties have one and all three are free. You will get acreage, zoning, assessed value, and an aerial photo.
2. **Turn on the map layers.** Wetlands, flood zones, soils, sometimes topography, laid right over your parcel. Almost nobody does this, and it is where the real answers are.
3. **Check the flood zone separately** on the FEMA flood map viewer, since county layers can lag behind map updates.
4. **Call the county planning or zoning desk** with one question: what could somebody build on this parcel?
5. **Write the answers on page 1.** You now know your own property.

Why your tax bill feels high. South Carolina assesses an owner-occupied home at 4 percent of market value, but vacant land at 6 percent. Owner-occupied homes are also exempt from the school operating portion of the bill, and your land is not. Higher ratio, plus a millage your neighbor does not pay. It is not a mistake.

Step 5 What selling actually costs in South Carolina

Throw out the national advice. South Carolina does two things its own way, and both affect your bottom line.

A closing attorney, and it is not optional

In many states a title company can close a land sale. Not here. The South Carolina Supreme Court has held that real estate closings must be conducted under the supervision of an attorney. Budget for it, and shop it: a cash land closing with no mortgage is a much lighter file than a house purchase, and the fee should reflect that. Call two or three firms and say exactly that.

The deed recording fee, or deed stamps

$1.85 for every $500 of value, about 0.37 percent of the sale price, plus a $15 filing fee. By custom the seller pays it. The table beside this is the quick math.

Survey, if one is needed

Scales with acreage, how thick the woods are, and how vague the existing legal description is. A platted lot is cheap. A large irregular tract described by a fence line and an oak tree is not. If you are selling to an investor, ask whether they will pay for it. Many will.

Prorated property taxes

You cover the part of the year you owned it. If you are behind, the back taxes come out of your proceeds at closing, which is a clean way to settle them.

SALE PRICE	DEED FEE
$10,000	**$37**
$20,000	**$74**
$30,000	**$111**
$40,000	**$148**
$50,000	**$185**
$75,000	**$278**
$100,000	**$370**

Rounds up to the next $500. The state keeps $1.30 of each $1.85 and the county keeps $0.55.

Step 6 What you do not pay

- [ ] **No state estate tax and no state inheritance tax** in South Carolina.
- [ ] **No separate transfer tax** beyond the deed recording fee above. Some towns that had a transfer fee before 1991 can still charge one, so ask if your parcel sits inside city limits.
- [ ] **No deed recording fee to get it out of an estate.** A deed releasing property to the distributees of a deceased person's estate is exempt. Getting the land into your name does not cost you that fee. Selling it afterward does.

Closings can be done by mail. If you live out of state, you do not need to fly in. You will need documents notarized wherever you are.

Step 7 Five things that stall a land sale

Tick any that apply to you. Each one is fixable, and knowing which one you have is worth more than dropping your price.

1. **No recorded legal access**
   There is a way in, but nothing in the record says you have the right to use it. Fixing this with a recorded easement often raises the value more than anything else you could spend money on.
2. **A title problem nobody has looked at**
   An heir who never signed, an old mortgage that was paid but never released, a name on the deed that does not match yours. These surface at the closing table and kill deals. Find them in week one instead.
3. **The soil will not permit for septic**
   No sewer and no septic means no house, and no house means a much smaller buyer pool. Worth getting evaluated before you price it.
4. **Wetlands or flood eating the buildable area**
   Twenty acres with two dry acres is a two acre parcel with a view. Price it for what can be built.
5. **A price set from a per acre number**
   Per acre figures off listing sites are not a measure of land. They are a measure of what can be built and how soon. An overpriced parcel sits for a year and then sells for less than it would have.

Step 8 Before you accept any offer

- [ ] **Get more than one offer.** Always. It costs a few phone calls and it is the single best thing you can do. Any honest buyer expects it.
- [ ] **Ask what they think it is worth retail.** A buyer who names a retail value and explains the gap is dealing with you honestly. One who will not name it is hiding the spread.
- [ ] **Ask which attorney is closing it.** There has to be one in South Carolina. If they cannot name a firm, slow down.
- [ ] **Ask whether they are assigning the contract** to somebody else. It is legal and common, but it changes who you are really dealing with and whether they can actually close.

Walk away from any of these: pressure to sign today, a price that expires tonight, anyone asking **you** to pay a fee or deposit to sell your land, an offer that will not be put in writing, no earnest money at all, or anyone asking you to sign a **deed** instead of a purchase contract. A contract comes first. The deed is the last thing you sign, at closing, in front of the attorney.

Want a second opinion on your parcel?

Send me the TMS number and I will come back with what I think it is worth, which of the five ways to sell actually fits your situation, and what you would walk away with on each. No cost and no obligation. If listing it is the better move for you, I will tell you that and point you to somebody good.

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