

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

December 5, 2019

So Your Dog Can Roll Over. Can It Pass a Co-op Board Interview?

Blowouts and bowties, Xanax and Zoloft. New York's co-op buyers and their dogs are jumping through all sorts of hoops to get precious approval.



When retired couple Heidi DeCoo and Carl Norton decided to buy a small co-op apartment in Manhattan's Lenox Hill neighborhood as a city getaway from their home in Ithaca, N.Y., they encountered a strange request. The building's co-op board asked that they bring their two gray-haired schnoodles (a cross between a miniature schnauzer and a poodle) in for their interview.

Ms. DeCoo had reservations. Farfel and Lilac were 13-years-old and a 10-hour round trip car ride would be so taxing for them that the couple would have to find a dog-friendly Manhattan hotel in which to spend the night. To add to it, Farfel had recently slipped while jumping onto the furniture and torn a ligament. Still, the board insisted.

A few weeks later, Ms. DeCoo and Mr. Norton arrived for the meeting. Farfel, still recovering and on pain medication, was wheeled in a baby carriage. After the long car journey, the couple took them for a walk along the East River to tire Lilac in hopes of keeping her from jumping and barking around the board members, who would decide whether the couple—and their pooches—were a fit to buy the just under \$500,000 apartment.

To Ms. DeCoo, the whole situation seemed absurd.



"By the time they got out of the car, they were already sort of out of it...Lilac was being dragged along and Farfel was all stoned in his carriage," she said. "I felt like a crazy old lady. When people see an old person with their dog in a baby carriage, they think they're nuts."

For home buyers in New York, there are few things as daunting as the dreaded co-op board interview. Having examined an applicant's financial statements, tax returns and recommendation letters, a panel convenes to judge, in person, whether a home buyer is up to snuff.

But adding pets to the interview process often means another layer of stress—and sometimes farce—for would-be buyers. In most cases, dogs are shuttled into an apartment, where they are brought before a small panel of board members who interact with them for a few minutes and get a feel for whether they're likely to be problematic to residents.

"It's an animal," said real-estate agent Janna Raskopf. "It's not like you can say to it, 'We're going on an interview, so be on your best behavior.' "

While New York City co-op boards have been loosening up some of their restrictions to get deals done in a slow New York market, some boards are still eager to meet prospective buyers' pets. The last thing co-ops want is for a dog to squat in the lobby, fight with another dog in the elevator or to have residents awakened by the early squawking of a bird, real-estate agents said.

Real-estate agent Barbara Fox said she recently had a client who was so terrified by the prospect of bringing her yappy poodle before the board of an Upper East Side co-op that the client ended up borrowing an older and more docile dog from a friend who had the same breed. She was accepted to the building—and the board still hasn't spotted the difference, Ms. Fox said, noting that she didn't have prior knowledge of the switch.

Other buyers are coming up with strategies to mitigate risk.

When buying a one-bedroom Lower East Side co-op for herself a few years back, real-estate agent Denise Bongiovanni said she sneaked some turkey slices into her pocket to keep her miniature dachshund Hershey under control.

"She knew they were in there so she sat on my lap the whole time staring at me, wanting the turkey," said Ms. Bongiovanni. "The board was like, 'She's so attentive!' I was thinking, 'Yes, she loves me but she loves the turkey more.'"

Bill Beauchamp and his partner walked their two dogs, Larry and Lainie, the 16 blocks to their interview for an East Village apartment in November in the hope that their energy levels might be slightly curbed. Lainie is a pure breed rat terrier and Larry is a Jack Russell and terrier mix.



"My worst case scenario was that Lainie, the princess, would bark or jump on everyone and demand a tremendous amount of attention and Larry, who doesn't hear so well, would pay no attention to us and walk all over the place," said Mr. Beauchamp, who is a real-estate agent at Citi Habitats. "When he doesn't like something, he will whine. And he can't really hear you when you say, 'Shut up, Larry.'"

In the end, both dogs were well-behaved and Mr. Beauchamp was approved. Similarly, Mr. Norton and Ms. DeCoo's pets were approved after what she described as a three- or four-minute meetup, during which a couple of board members took a quick look at the dogs in the hallway. "It turned out to be much ado about nothing," Mr. Norton said.

These interviews don't always go smoothly and it isn't uncommon for a buyer to be rejected because of their dog, said real estate attorney Michael J. Romer, noting that he's had multiple clients disappointed.

Boards have reason to be selective as incidents like dog bites can open them up to legal liability. In some cases, boards are demanding headshots, résumés and even recommendation letters specifically for pets to protect themselves.

Ms. Raskopf said she had a client whose dog had to sit with a third-party "dog whisperer" brought in by the board for a 10-minute evaluation, during which she just quietly observed the pooch. Occasionally, they bring another dog into the room to test their response.

One buyer recalled a board member going to their own apartment downstairs to see if they could hear her dog's claws on the floor from their unit.

While it is common for applicants to take their dogs for long walks before the interview to exhaust them, some pet owners are going further and heading to the drug counter.

Stephen Geller, an agent with the Corcoran Group said he once had clients who took their terrier "to the shrink" before their interview for a roughly \$2 million apartment in Kips Bay. "I remember I went to their house and they said 'We're working on him. We're trying to figure out the right dose of Xanax and Zoloft. We don't want him to show up passed out.' "

Bash Dibra, a New York City dog trainer and author, said he doesn't recommend that route, since you don't want the dog to appear "drugged out." Mr. Dibra said he's consulted with clients before interviews to help prepare their dogs for the process.

"Everyone cuts corners, but you have to be dogmatic about these things," he joked.

Many pups are also showing up at interviews dressed to impress.

Mary Anne Greene, an agent with Douglas Elliman, said she once represented an older woman buying an apartment in a tony apartment building on Sutton Place who called her personal hair stylist to give her dog a blowout for the occasion. The miniature poodle named Baby also got a manicure and was dressed in pink bows and barrettes. The co-op board was amused. Baby passed.

Real-estate agent Jessica Levine recalled a client with a pit bull mix, who was dressed in a bow tie and sweater.

Already filled with trepidation about an interview at the Park Slope co-op where they'd applied to purchase a \$1.35 million apartment, Brooklynite Tory Peterschild, a software engineer, and her husband Sam LaCroix panicked when the agents on the deal, Luke Hoback and MaryElizabeth Smith of the Corcoran Group, said they might have to bring their dog Billie.



Bringing the adventurous three-year-old Goldendoodle posed some risks.

"She is super lazy and relaxed when it is just us, but meeting people is her kryptonite," Ms. Peterschild said. "She just goes nuts. She likes to run through people's legs from behind."

So stressed was Ms. Peterschild about her interview that she considered giving Billie some CBD-infused treats to calm her before the interview. "But we didn't want her to seem zoned out and weird," she said.

They were relieved when the board was satisfied by the materials the couple sent about Billie and didn't request a pet interview. On a résumé put together by Ms. Peterschild, Billie is seen draping herself over the furniture in modelesque poses. Under likes, the couple lists treats, snoozing, playing fetch, tiny humans, radishes, apples and pears. Under qualifications, it reads "doesn't shed."

Many co-ops have banned certain more aggressive breeds. One particularly strict co-op on Lower Fifth Avenue has banned Alaskan Malamutes, Caucasian Mountain Dogs, Chihuahuas, Chow Chows, Dachshunds, Dalmatians, Doberman pinschers, German shepherds, Huskies, Jack Russell Terriers, Lhasa apsos, Old English Sheepdogs, Papillons, Pekingese, Pinschers, Pit Bulls, Presa Canarios, Rottweilers, Toy Poodles and Schnauzers, according to its rules.

The co-op, at 11 Fifth Avenue, says that approval for a dog will only be given if a resident signs a letter acknowledging that the dog can remain in the building solely at the board's discretion and that if, after a trial period, the board isn't happy, the dog can be removed.

And it isn't only dogs. Some boards are taking on birds too.

"I've been calling myself the Dr. Dolittle of deals," said agent Nicole Hay of Halstead Real Estate, who has helped multiple clients get their pets past the board.

One particularly memorable incident, which she has dubbed "Parrotgate," involved convincing the board of an Upper East Side co-op to accept a tropical four-inch-tall bird.

It was tricky. "They said, 'No one wants to ride in an elevator with someone with a bird on their shoulder,'" Ms. Hay said. "I was shocked. It would be one thing if it was a Python or a Rottweiler. I had gray hairs from it, all because of this bird."

Agent Janice Silver of Compass recalled an angry exchange between her and the property manager of a building on Gramercy Park after her clients were told to bring their parrot to an interview in the dead of winter.

"I explained that it was a tropical bird and very wrong to expect him to come out in freezing temperatures," she said. "It's not like a dog where you can wrap it up in a blanket. I had images of my clients standing out on the corner with the bird waiting for a cab."

Help Fido Ace His Interview

Longtime dog trainer Elena Gretch of It's A Dog's Life NY has prepared countless dogs for co-op board interviews. She shared some of her top tips.

1. Don't wait until the last minute

Ms. Gretch said she recommends all New York pups attend obedience training from an early age, rather than leave it until the last minute when a stressful situation—like a co-op board interview—comes up. "It's not realistic to expect to change your dog's behavior in two weeks," she said. She recommends a minimum of about three months of training to see a tangible change in a dog. So, if you know you have a co-op application coming up, start training right away.

2. Try to avoid the interview altogether

Ms. Gretch said she recommends putting together a packet for the board with the dog's height, weight, vaccination records and recommendation letters from a veterinarian, a dog sitter and a neighbor. Even better, if the dog has completed any obedience training, include the certificate. You might get out of the interview by being proactive, she said.

3. Walk your dog

If you do have to interview with your dog, Ms. Gretch said she recommends some additional exercise before the appointment to expend some of the dog's energy. But don't forget to give the dog a bath afterward. Boards don't like smelly dogs, either.

How the Board Decides

The board of a co-op building has to size up the pet of a prospective buyer in a short interview. They deploy some techniques to figure out who is a very good boy.

Sharon Fahy is president of her dog-friendly co-op board on East 74th Street. She said her board asks for pictures of pooches because occasionally buyers will tell fibs about their size, saying they're 50 pounds when they're really more like 90 pounds. Photos tell the real story, she says.

In an interview, she said she watches carefully to make sure that the pet is responding to its owner's commands and isn't noisy, like one dachshund who tortured residents of the building a few years back with its yelping throughout the day.

The board, she says, also looks at a pet's appearance—for instance, a dog's coat and nails—to make sure it is groomed properly. That points to a responsible owner, she said.