

Getting Your House Ready to Sell: What to Fix, What to Skip, and What Pays Back

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The homes that sell fast and full-price in a soft market share three traits: clean, neutral, and priced right. Preparation is the part you control completely, most of it costs little, and the highest-payback work is rarely the work sellers assume. This guide sorts it: do, consider, skip.

DO: THE ALMOST-FREE LIST

- **Deep clean everything.** The single highest return of any line on this page. Buyers read clean as maintained.
- **Declutter and depersonalize.** Buyers need to picture their life in the rooms, and your belongings interrupt that picture. Pack half of what you own; you are moving anyway. This one issue quietly kills more listings than bad roofs do.
- **Fix the small broken things.** Patched walls, working bulbs, tightened handles, serviced appliances. Each one removes a mental "what else is wrong" tick.
- **Curb appeal basics:** mowed, edged, bark refreshed, front door clean, house numbers visible. The showing starts at the curb, and in wildfire country, cleared defensible space reads as both safety and care.

DO: THE PAPERWORK WORTH PULLING EARLY

- **Permit history.** Pull it before you list, not after a buyer's inspection or appraisal turns it up. A gap found on your own schedule is a conversation you control; the same gap found once you are under contract is a renegotiation, or a lost buyer. This matters most on rural and homestead properties, where additions, shops, wells, and outbuildings often predate anyone in the household tracking paperwork.
- **Title does not cover this.** A preliminary title report covers ownership, liens, and easements recorded at the county clerk's office. Permits live in a different system, the city or county building department, and routine unpermitted work with no lien attached will not surface in a title search. Confirm which jurisdiction the property sits in first; city and county building departments often run separate systems.

- **Cross-check the assessor record.** Pull the parcel record alongside the permit search. A mismatch between the county's recorded square footage or structure count and what is actually built, an extra bedroom, a converted garage, a second structure, is often the first sign something was never permitted.
- **Well and septic records,** if the property has either. A septic evaluation and a well log or flow test answer the two questions rural buyers ask first, and having them in hand before you list keeps the inspection period from turning up a surprise.

None of this requires a professional. If you would rather not run it down yourself, ask about having it done for you as part of a listing consultation.

CONSIDER: TARGETED MONEY

- **Neutral paint** in any loud or dated rooms. The best cost-to-impact ratio of any real project.
- **Professional photography.** Buyers decide in seconds while scrolling; dark or phone-shot photos end the conversation before a showing exists. Aerial shots for acreage.
- **Staging** where it counts: living room, primary bedroom, kitchen table. Partial staging of an occupied house often beats full staging of an empty one.
- **Pre-listing inspection** if you suspect an issue. Finding it on your schedule beats renegotiating on the buyer's. It joins your disclosure, so decide with your agent.

SKIP: THE MONEY PIT LIST

Full kitchen and bathroom remodels before selling rarely return their cost, and there is a sharper problem: strong renovation choices shrink the buyer pool. Buyers do not add your renovation to the value; they price in the cost of changing what does not match their vision. In a small market a narrower pool means a longer sit. The same logic applies to expensive landscaping overhauls and high-end fixture swaps. Sell the canvas, not your painting of it.

The exception: repairs to things that are broken. A failed heat pump or an active leak is not a renovation, and buyers will price it at double its cost.

THE ORDER OF OPERATIONS

Walk the house like a buyer, or have someone unsentimental do it. Start the paperwork the same week: permit history, title, and any well or septic records, so nothing surfaces mid-contract. Then work the

physical list: clean and clear first, repair second, paint third, photograph last, and price with comps rather than hope. Jamie offers a flat-fee **Seller Prep Walk-Through**: a room-by-room list of exactly what to do and what to skip for your specific house, jamie-the-realtor.com/bspoke-consultations. The companion Why Listings Fail guide covers what happens when this preparation gets skipped.

Cost and payback figures are general estimates as of mid-2026 and vary by property and market conditions. General information, not a promise of any sale outcome or price.