

The First Time Homebuyers Guide to Lehigh Acres

BROUGHT TO YOU BY:
JASON SCHARF & JENNA SCHARF



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WHY WE PREPARED THIS GUIDE

We prepared this guide because like you, before we became real estate agents we were first time homebuyers. This guide is designed to help clients better understand what it means to buy your first home in Lehigh Acres. Many people do not really understand what Lehigh is all about and this guide should give you a better understanding.

We believe this guide will best serve those who are not currently homeowners and may not have lived or given thought to living in Lehigh Acres before. You'll learn why so many choose to call Lehigh Acres home as well as get a little insight into the process.

WHO ARE WE?

Jason and Jenna Scharf are members of The Pell Team which has been operating in Southwest Florida since 2009. We discovered how many people needed someone who really specialized in first time homebuyers especially in the Lehigh Acres area. We set a path to become the specialist in that area and began our education.

Because we have gone through the process of buying a home for the first time in Lehigh Acres without having ever lived in the area prior it was a natural fit for us to implement previous knowledge along with new education on how Lehigh Acres and the process for first time homebuyers is evolving.

HOW WE CAN HELP YOU

By specializing in first time homebuyers and Lehigh Acres we completely understand how the process works and how different areas within Lehigh Acres differ. This knowledge serves our clients well as they begin the search for their first home.

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DISCLAIMER AND PRIVACY POLICY

This Guide is a compilation of the questions that we are asked on a regular basis but remember that things can change quickly. We will always do our best to update this guide on a regular basis, but you should consider this as a guide and not take it as “the end all be all” final word on all subjects.

By downloading or receiving this guide you agree to hold us harmless for any mistakes, suggestions or comments made herein

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AREA INFORMATION

Q. Is buying a home in Lehigh Acres a good investment?

A. The answer to this really is dependent on the home that you choose. Not every home is a good investment in any area. However, data collected from bestplaces.net suggests that homes in Lehigh Acres have appreciated by 11.80% in just the past 12 months. By implementing our experience and knowledge we can help you find the perfect home for your current and future situation.

Q. What kind of dining options are available in Lehigh?

A. Lehigh Acres has a variety of dining options. Enjoy a nice sit down dinner at Marias, EmJay's tavern, Mr. Bbq, Homestead Sports Club, Lazanos, Joe's Café, New York NY Pizza, Rib City Grill, and Perkins just to name a few. In a hurry? Lehigh also has a large variety of fast food such as McDonalds, Arbys, Wendys, Burger King, Subway, Taco Ardiente, Popeyes, Dunkin Donuts, Baskin Robins, Taco Bell, and coming soon Culvers. Just a short drive away is Alva's Diner serving up some of the best breakfast, broasted chicken, and downhome meals in the area. Don't forget to indulge in some homemade ice cream from Country Style Ice Cream located in the heart of Lehigh.

Q. What are my local shopping and entertainment choices?

A. You won't have to go far for grocery shopping. Lehigh is home to a brand new Publix, Walmart, multiple Winn-Dixies, and Jacks Market. As if that wasn't enough, we are also welcoming the Aldi's brand to the community. There is a multitude of local shops along main thoroughfares including Ace Hardware and Bealls Outlet.

If you're looking to enjoy the great outdoors you'll have to check out Trailhead Park which is complete with an outdoor workout area, picnic pavilions, and a half mile paved trail encircling a 3-acre replicated prairie. Also check out Veterans Community Park and Lazy Springs if you're in the mood for some off-roading. With easy access to state roads and I-75 you are just a short drive away from the beach as well as other dining, shopping, and entertainment activities.

Q. Does Lehigh have any golf courses?

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A. Absolutely! Majestic Golf Club, Copper Head Golf Club, and Mirror Lake Golf Course are all located in Lehigh Acres. These courses are typically more affordable than those located in Fort Myers but prices are subject to change so contact us for more details.

Q. Are there any hospitals nearby?

A. Lehigh Regional Medical Center is a community hospital that serves a five county area with quality healthcare. With over 100 physicians, the hospital includes specialties such as cardiology, gastroenterology, pathology, gynecology, and so much more!

Q. I notice many homes in Lehigh Acres seem to be hooked up to well, is this the case everywhere?

A. While many homes in Lehigh Acres have well and septic there is a large area connected to city water and Sewer. It really is a matter of personal preference. Some people like the convenience of city water and sewer while others don't mind maintaining their systems in exchange for not having a water bill.

Q. I Moved to the area for school but housing is really expensive, could Lehigh Acres be a good alternative to living in Fort Myers.

A. Absolutely! Many students make the commute from Lehigh Acres to Florida Gulf Coast University and Florida Southwestern State College. According to data from Bestplaces.com Lehigh Acres has a 17.10% Lower cost of living than the rest of the United States

Q. I would like to find work close to home, are there part-time or full-time jobs?

A. unemployment in Lehigh is almost a full percentage point lower than the national average! New businesses are really starting to find the benefits of operating in Lehigh Acres, Culvers and Aldi Supermarkets are just a few major brands opening in very soon. Also, Gartner is located just outside of Lehigh Acres in the community of Gateway. We have a very large service industry which employees a lot of full and part time help. Being a growing area you'll find many opportunities for employment. Easy access to Fort Myers and I-75 also makes the commute easy if you do need to find work outside of Lehigh.

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Q. I have always volunteered, are there opportunities to do that?

A. There are plenty of opportunities for you to lend your expertise in a lot of fields locally. Also, you'll find places in SW Florida that always needs as much help as they can get.

WHY BUY IN LEHIGH ACRES

Q. Why would I buy in Lehigh Acres vs. Fort Myers or Cape Coral?

A. While all three of these cities are great places to live for many different reasons, Lehigh has some advantages that the others don't, especially with first time home buyers. For instance, prices in Lehigh acres tend to be much more affordable than in Fort Myers. Another great reason to choose Lehigh is the ability to find larger more private lots. While Cape Coral shares some similarities with Lehigh in terms of affordability, keep in mind traffic can be an issue due to congested bridges causing an increase in commute times.

Q. Why should I buy instead of rent?

A. A home can be a great investment. When you rent, you write your monthly check and that money is gone forever. However, when you own your home you can right off expenses such as loan interest and taxes saving you a lot of money each year. Another great reason to buy instead of rent is the value of your home can rise over time helping you to build equity. Finally, you'll enjoy having something that's all yours.

Q. Someone mentioned using a buyer's agent, what is that?

A. With buyer's agency we work for you, to ensure you purchase the best home at the best price. As a buyer agent, our total responsibility is to you! This means agents have to be very careful in how they handle information, what they say to agents that could hurt your position, and to focus their attention to what you need. With our knowledge and expertise in the Lehigh market, we are confident that we are the best agents to represent you!

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Q. Does it cost me anything to have you represent me as a buyer's agent?

A. The seller always pays for the commission even if a builder is selling the home. Having a buyer's agent working for you should never cost you a penny!

Q. I'm not sure which area I want to be in. Can you help me in whichever area I end up choosing?

A. Of course, we can help you in any area of Southwest Florida. One of our specialties is helping you funnel through all the choices and focus on the neighborhoods that best match your price range and needs.

Q. I'm thinking about areas outside of Southwest Florida. Can you help me?

A. We have contacts with like-minded agents throughout Florida and even across the country that we can recommend. If you decide to look in different areas we would be happy to help you find the right agent for the job.

Q. What is Chinese Drywall? Do I need to be concerned when purchasing a home?

A. Chinese Drywall refers to an environmental health issue involving defective drywall manufactured in China and imported to the United States. The defective drywall especially became an issue during 2004-2007 when there was a building boom and American suppliers could not keep up with the demand so they imported drywall from China. Chinese drywall has been identified as a health issue because of the emissions and sulfurous gases.

Most of the homes with Chinese drywall have already been identified and remediated. We also recommend that you have a professional home inspection done on any home that you want to purchase. The inspector will check for signs of defective drywall while inspecting the other aspects of the home and alert you to any concerns.

Q. Is it true that bank owned homes cost less?

A. In some cases this is correct but be prepared to see homes that may need a lot of work or are missing items. If you find a foreclosure you wish to make an offer on we will send it directly to the bank. The bank normally waits for a period of time before reviewing offers to make a decision.

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You can often find yourself in a multiple offer situation so be prepared for competition on bank owned homes. One thing to consider is by the time you update a bank owned home you may end up spending the same or more than you would have for a non-bank owned home.

Q. Will the bank make repairs on a bank owned home?

A. When you buy a bank owned home, you will be signing an “As-is” addendum that states you are buying this home as you see it. No repairs!

GETTING A MORTGAGE

Q. How do I find out how much I qualify for?

A. The only way is to contact lender and start the pre-approval process. This usually takes about 15-20 minutes on the phone and you should be able to get an answer within a few hours. You should never have to pay to obtain the pre-approval! If a lender asks for money upfront you have the wrong lender. Feel free to contact us for a list of trusted lenders in our area.

Q. What do I need to make an offer?

A. If you are obtaining a mortgage then you always should start with a pre-approval. Once you are approved, you’ll have a better idea of the price range where you should be looking. Sellers will also want to see a pre-approval when you make your offer.

Q. How much do I need to put towards the down payment?

A. You have several choices when it comes to the down payment. If you are a veteran and decide to get a VA loan then you wouldn’t have to put any money down. If you decide to get a government backed FHA loan you can put as little as 3.5% down. Lastly, conventional loans require at least 5% of the purchase price down. Of course each loan has its own guidelines so you’ll want to consult with a lender.

Q. Do lenders do many VA loans?

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A. Different lenders have different loans. If you are interested in a VA loan, or have served in the armed forces and know you have on available to you, we are happy to guide you towards a veteran friendly lending institution. By the way, thank you very much for your service to our country.

Q. Who would you recommend if I want a loan approval?

A. We have a few lenders that we've worked with before that each offer unique incentives for choosing them. Feel free to email or call us for their names and contact info.

Q. How long does it take to get pre-approved? Does it cost anything?

A. The pre-approval process is quite simple, many lenders even offer a secure site where you can upload all of your information for them to review. Other lenders may require a phone call or to sit down with you in person. No matter what the circumstance it only takes about 3-5 days to get a pre-approval. Not to be confused with a pre-qualification, which may only take a day and doesn't really reflect a solid agreement from your lending institution. As always, you should never have to pay for a pre-approval either.

Q. Can I use my lender if I'm buying a home from a builder?

A. Yes and no. If your lender offers a construction-to-perm loan AND if your builder gets approved by your lender, then yes. If your lender does not offer a construction-to-perm loan OR your builder does not get approved by your lender then you may need to seek out a lender the builder has worked with before OR a different lender altogether.

There is also a chance that the builder (depending on how big an operation they are) will have their own lender that offers better incentives than yours may. It's best to research 3 or 4 and get a clear idea across the board about how they each compare to one another.

THE BUYING PROCESS

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Q. Since I have never bought a home before, I have no idea how to even begin. What's the best way to start?

A. First, if you are financing the home you will want to talk to a lender before you do anything else. There is nothing worse than falling in love with a home you can't afford-nothing else will look as good after that one. Next, you will want to reach out to one of us, your agents. You will undoubtedly save a lot of time by consulting with a Realtor that you can trust to help you guide you through this process.

Q. Once I find a home, how long will it take to close the deal?

A. If you are paying cash, you can close in roughly 2-3 weeks. If you are getting a mortgage, it will require you to do an appraisal and you will be more at the mercy of your lending institution and the appraiser's schedule. We would suggest you plan for 30-60 days for a financed closing.

Q. Do you do the contract or do I need to hire someone? Do you charge to do this?

A. We have been highly trained in writing contracts. The local board of realtors provides us with a standard contract and addendums to use as needed for each individual client and transaction. We are careful to always have your best interest at heart and cover all the bases when writing out the contracts for our clients. You do not need an attorney. However, you're always welcome to consult an attorney if that makes you feel most comfortable.

In Florida, the seller typically pays the commission so the great news is there is nothing to pay us for our services, although a referral now and then would be great!

Q. How does my offer get to the seller? How fast will I get an answer?

A. Once an offer is signed by the buyer it will be emailed or faxed to the seller's agent for them to present to the seller. In the past agents used to present to the seller but with the advent of buyer agency the listing agent does not like them talking to the seller directly if possible. If the offer is presented to the owner or bank (if bank owned) you should have an answer within 1-4 days.

Q. How much should I offer the seller? I hear I can submit a low-ball offer, is that true?

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A. This is best answered after doing some research. We are highly trained in comparable market analysis to help determine what the average sales have been in that neighborhood over the last few months. Sometimes it is best to use an average price per square foot. It all depends on each unique home. You can offer a low-ball offer but one of the worst things you can do is offer so low that you offend a seller and either you don't hear back from them ever, OR they decide to play hard ball and barely budge at all on their asking price. Remember, real estate is all about emotions. Let us guide you here and as always the end decision is yours.

Q. I wish I could see a contract before I buy so I can read it over, can I do that?

A. Absolutely, we would be happy to provide you with a contract to review at you own pace. Just send us an email or call us and we can get you one right away.

Q. How should we take title in the home? Does it matter?

A. This is a great question, for this we would refer you to one of our trusted title companies. A Realtor is not at liberty to explain more on this matter but we can definitely point you in the right direction. In Florida, typically we use title companies to close the transaction and they can guide you in this respect. Yes it matters! Your title company will be able to explain all the reasons why.

Q. A friend said I should get a home warranty, are they worth the money?

A. If you're buying new construction the state of Florida will require the builder to offer you a one year home warranty. If you are looking to purchase a home warranty for a resale home it would be wise to speak with a few reputable companies as well as some home inspectors to get a feel for what the companies cover and what the inspectors tend to see failing most frequently in homes of comparable age to the one you are considering purchasing.

Q. How do I see what homes are for sale in my price range?

A. The more you share with us about your wish list the more we can narrow down the homes that are available for you. Our Multiple Listing Service (MLS) can provide you with all the homes in the market that meet your wish list and fit your budget. If you still aren't finding what your heart desires, we can continue adjusting the search until it starts meeting your expectations.

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This is where an agent comes in handy since we have access to ALL homes for sale as well as instant access to all the new listings as soon as they hit the market. One thing you'll run into when searching on your own will be homes that are not active any longer or misinformation from other third party sites. So having us guide you is always the best and safest route to go.

Q. I've used several sites to find homes, do they all have the same information?

A. Any site (such as ours) that have a search for homes feature that is directly tied into the same MLS agents use will have ALL the homes. Sometimes websites like Google, Trulia, etc. only have a percentage of the homes because they do not have an agreement with all the MLS's to show their data. Again, this is why an agent is so important to insure the most accurate information is provided.

Q. Is it possible for you to update me when a home I might like comes on the market?

A. Yes, we would be more than happy to set you up with a search today! Just email us or call with your wish list in mind. The MLS search that we use will update you on homes as soon as they come on the market keeping you "in the know" at all moments.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE CONTRACT IS WRITTEN?

Q. What if the sellers don't accept my offer? Can I counter their counter offer?

A. Negotiations go on until both parties give up and move on. Sometimes your first offer is not what the sellers are looking for so we may have to continue negotiations or you may decide to move onto a different home. That is why it's very important to consider making a strong offer the very first time.

Q. When do we get a home inspection? Do we need to be there for it?

A. Once you and the sellers have agreed upon the purchase price and terms, all parties will sign the contract. Once the contract is signed you can make an appointment to have a licensed inspector come out to the home and write up a report. In most cases, the contract will state that

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you have a certain amount of time to get an inspection. It is important to have the inspection completed within this time frame in case there are any major issues.

Q. What if we get a bad inspection report, do I still have to buy the home?

A. A lot of times the licensed inspector will find a number of minor issues to keep on eye on or suggest repairs in the near future. Unfortunately, every so often you stumble upon large problems such as an old leaky roof or failing A/C. We understand that as a first time homebuyer these issues might be overwhelming and too costly for you to repair yourself. Thankfully, the contract has allowed a period of time for the inspection so if issues become too costly or troublesome you can walk away without losing a dime. On some occasions we would ask for items to be repaired but that's on a case-by-case basis and will depend on the sellers motivation to sell.

Q. What is an “escrow”? Can you help me with all the steps?

A. Opening escrow refers to the process of giving the title company copies of the contract, the earnest money check, as well as anything else important that contributes to a smooth closing. Yes we help you with all these steps.

Q. What if I change my mind? Can I get out of the contract?

A. Writing an offer for a property is a serious purchase so the first thing you should do is make sure you want this home. Sometimes this means “sleeping on it” to make sure you're happy.

As for getting out of the contract, you will need to follow the letter of the contract which does have several options for you to get out. A couple of options are the home inspection which you have up to 15 days to have completed, the CC&R's and By-laws of community, and there are several others that we should clearly explain before you ever sign the offer.

Q. Can I do any work on the home before the closing?

A. This is a big NO! In the contract it explains that you cannot work on, move anything in, or in no way use this home as your own until the sale is closed. We often hear “I need to store a few things in the garage” but that is not an option.

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Q. Who are the utility companies?

A. Each community or home can have different utility companies, all of whom we are familiar with. About 7 days prior to closing we will send you the list for your home. You'll contact them about 2 days ahead of closing to have them transferred into your name.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I CLOSE ON THE HOME?

Q. How does the closing happen?

A. The closing happens once everyone has signed, the monies have cleared the bank, and the deed has been recorded in the name of your choosing. You will be notified when this has happened so you know the home is now yours.

Q. Can you help me find a handyman or someone to help with some repairs or upgrades?

A. We would be happy to refer you to some companies that we are familiar with. It is always best to use someone who is licensed and insured. This may mean you pay a bit more than you would for "Bob" down the street who does carpentry, BUT it will ensure you have the best kind of protection for your investment.

Q. Will you be able to help me after the sale if I have questions?

A. Of course! Hopefully this is a relationship that lasts longer than the purchase of your first home. We are always here to help in any way we can. Please feel free to refer your friends and family if they have questions too!

UNDERSTANDING HOMEOWNER ASSOCIATIONS

Q. What is a Homeowner Association?

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A. A homeowners association (HOA) is an organization in a subdivision, planned community, or condominium that makes and enforces rules and sets an operating budget for the homes within its jurisdiction.

Q. I've heard the community/HOA's can be restrictive, is that true?

A. Most people find HOA's to be very fair and really look out for the betterment of the community. Restrictions can vary but some of the more common ones may include what kind of yard art you can use or which paint colors are allowed. Now, can you find some rules that you don't agree with? Of course, but that can be taken to the HOA and if the people of the community agree with you it can be changed.

Q. What if I have a problem with a neighbor? Does the HOA get involved?

A. You'll find the communities very responsive to complaints and feedback from residents. Their goal is to ensure the integrity of the community and enforce people to follow the rules.

Q. What does A HOA fee cover?

A. An HOA fee is a fee that covers things like front yard maintenance, roof repairs in some cases, water, sewer, cable, and even maintenance of the outside of your home. When you're looking at the listings I send you may see different types of fees. Please feel free to ask for explanations regarding these fees as every community is different.

Q. How fast do the HOA fees go up? Is there a limit?

A. This one is difficult to say because it depends on a lot of things like inflation, age of the community, gates vs. non-gated, golf, etc. For the most part the communities are sensitive to keeping lower fees.

Q. I heard about a transfer fee, who pays that?

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A. A transfer fee is a cost to the buyer at the time of closing to transfer the name, etc. on the property to the new buyer. The fee goes directly to the HOA for processing and reserves.

Q. What's the difference between the master HOA fee, the HOA fee, and a recreation fee?

A. The master HOA fee is meant to cover the maintenance of the common areas and gated security (if applicable). The HOA fee is meant to cover maintenance of the house and yard in your particular section of the community. The community recreation fee pays for the costs of operating the amenity centers. Sometimes communities can combine these into one fee.

RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Q. How do I contact you?

A. The best way to reach us is by email but always feel free to call. We keep our phones with us most of the time.

Jenna Scharf, Realtor ®

jenna@jennascharf.com, 919.906.0097, www.jennascharf.com

Jason Scharf, Realtor ®

jason@jason-scharf.com, 941.214.0375, www.jason-scharf.com

Q. Who do I call if I have a friend or family member that wants to buy or sell their home?

A. You can call us! We appreciate any and all referrals!

