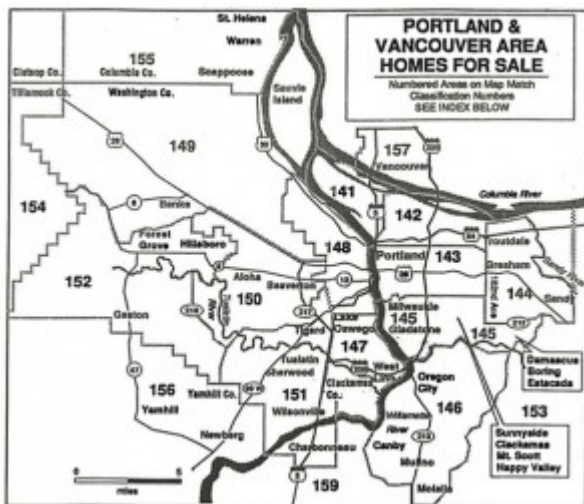


MLS Insight: Thinking About an RMLS™ Without Area Numbers

This post is part of MLS Insight, a series about how things work at RMLS™.



An MLS without area numbers: this idea might strike terror in your heart...or you might say to yourself, "it's about time!" In any case, it is not a proposal that is currently on the table, but with the changes in technology and the way people think about location, it is probably not too early to start the conversation.

When RMLS™ opened its doors in 1991, it was to the REALTORS® in the Portland metropolitan area in Oregon. At that time, the major advertising vehicle for homes for sale was the newspaper—*The Oregonian*, in our case. RMLS™ based its MLS area numbers on the map and classified ad numbers of *The Oregonian*. The 12 core areas for Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties have remained basically unchanged for 23 years.

When regions were added, local preferences regarding area numbers were retained. Clark County, for example, is divided into more than 30 areas, while Coos County is contained in one area.

The end result is more than 200 area numbers in RMLSweb,

without a common reason why each geographical area is an "Area Number." In some cases, a single area comprises several large but dissimilar communities. In others, areas may have so few listings and sales as a sample size that few, if any, conclusions could be drawn from looking at their data. In fact, there are rural areas that had no new listings and no closed sales in all of 2013.

In the world of today, *The Oregonian* posts its real estate ads online and there is no search option for area numbers. GPS location services have replaced maps to a large degree. It is a very different world than the world of 1991, when there was a Thomas Brothers map in the car of virtually every REALTOR®.

Here are some things to think about:

What role do area numbers play in the life of an RMLS™ subscriber today?

Has map search replaced searching by area number? Could it?

What could replace area numbers for searching besides map search—counties? zip codes? There should be something to narrow the initial search that pertains to location.

What about Market Action and other statistical reports? (Some counties are already reported in terms of zip codes in Market Action.)

If and when we ever do move away from area numbers, we need to have a good plan to meet the needs of our subscribers. Ideas?

Thanks for voyaging into the future with me. Next month we will talk with the various departments at RMLS™ and their plans for the upcoming year. If you have any questions you would like to have answered about how things work at RMLS™, I encourage you to post a comment to this blog.

UPDATE (November 20, 2014): RMLS™ is not the only MLS engaging in this interesting discussion. Here's an article from the

Seattle Post-Intelligencer about NWMLS area numbers.

MLS Insight: A Brief History of RMLS™



This post is part of MLS Insight, a series about governance issues at RMLS™.

RMLS™ was created when representatives from four Boards of REALTORS® in the Portland metro area decided to form a service that was an alternative to a broker-owned multiple listing service in business since the 1970s. The Articles of Incorporation were filed on August 3, 1990, establishing RMLS™ as a 501C for-profit corporation.

Membership

The first RMLS™ listings went live in May 1991. Within a few short weeks, 3,433 area REALTORS® had subscribed to the fledgling MLS. This was 75% of the possible membership, and RMLS™ never looked back. Membership grew steadily to a high of almost 15,000 subscribers in 2007 and then fell in concert

with the recession and REALTOR® membership to a low of just over 10,000 subscribers in January 2013. As the market has improved, subscriber numbers are rising again, and sit at about 11,000 midway through 2014.

Listings and Lockboxes

RMLS™ was computerized and offered a lockbox from the beginning. A staple of a 1990s MLS was “The Book” (*above*), a bi-weekly tome of active listings with a quarterly comparable book. As personal computing and connectivity became the norm, demand for the books waned, and they became optional in 1997. The last book printed was the 1999 4th Quarter Comparable Book.

The first lockbox was a mechanical system made by Multacc, which came with the following tip: *Carry a can of silicone spray with you in case your key gets stuck in a dirty lockbox.* This system was replaced in 1995 by a series of Supra electronic systems. After 18 years with Supra, RMLS™ switched to the SentiLock system in 2013.

Areas of Coverage

In the beginning, RMLS™ served only the five-county Portland metropolitan area in Oregon. The Douglas County Board of REALTORS® initiated discussions with RMLS™ early in 1998 to see if service could be extended to that area. Service to both Douglas and Coos Counties in Oregon was added later that year. The following year a merger with the Clark County, Washington MLS was finalized, bringing membership over the 7,000 mark. Service to Lane County followed in 2001. Curry County and the Mid-Columbia region in Oregon and Washington joined in 2005, with the Columbia Basin and Baker and Union Counties following suit in 2007 and Wallowa County in 2008.

Harnessing the Power of the Internet

RMLS™ utilized a vended dial-up system from Interealty called

Stellar as the main MLS system until 2002. Development on RMLSweb began in 1998, and the first version of RMLSweb was rolled out early in 1999 as a parallel, search-only, internet-accessible system. Originally developed by a vendor, the code for RMLSweb was acquired in 2001 and development moved in-house. By the end of the following year, migration from the legacy system was complete and RMLSweb became the sole system, supported and extended entirely by in-house programmers and IT personnel.

RMLS™ first sent listings to the internet in 1996. The first internet policy to govern internet display of listings was crafted in 1998, establishing the RMLS™ philosophy that the broker should determine the destination of their own listings and setting the stage for today's busy internet world of IDX, VOW, and syndication.

Communicating with Subscribers

RMLS™ had a goal of good communication with brokers and subscribers and outstanding customer service from the early days. The Training Department's origins date to 1994, while the first Help Desk calls were taken by RMLS™ staff in 1996. (Prior to that time, the system vendor handled Tech Support.) A Technology/Trade Fair has been held annually since 1994. Today, our technicians can chat online and webinars have replaced many classroom offerings.

RMLS™ implemented the communication technology of the day as it became cost-effective. Broadcast faxes to brokerages started in 1993, an early predecessor to the current weekly email "RMLS™ Weekly Report." In 1996, the REALTORS® Fax Service provided a way for subscribers to obtain RMLS™ information and documents 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Today, the Forms and Documents menu of RMLSweb is the mature version of that idea.

It's difficult to encompass 23 years in a few words, but RMLS™

has changed greatly along with the real estate community and the world at large. MLS staff had one computer to conduct business in 1991, and were excited to have a 24-dot matix printer. Although a fledgling internet existed in 1991, most of us were unaware of it, and it took a largish room to house the computing power of a smartphone.

Next month we will talk about resources—how to find information you need to enhance your MLS experience online and from our staff. If you have any questions you would like to have answered about RMLS™ governance or operation, I encourage you to post a comment to this blog.