

**Divorcing the House**  
**The Family Residence in the Divorce: The Complete Guide 2024**  
by Greg B. Enos

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# Divorcing the House

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by Greg B. Enos

The family home is often one of the largest assets in divorces. The divorce attorney and paralegal should understand how real estate is valued and divided in a divorce. But, the family house very often is tied up in the deep emotions, fears and anger involved in a divorce. So, the fight to determine who stays in the house and who has to leave, who gets what out of the house and what happens to the house at the end of the divorce case may involve considerations other than just dollars and sense.

### **Educate the Client Early and Often about How the Family Residence Is Handled in a Divorce**

The attorney and law firm staff should educate the client on how the family residence will be handled in the divorce, who gets to use it, how it is valued and how it will be awarded or sold at the time of divorce. The client must be prompted to make a smart dollars and sense business decision about the house and not be swayed by sentiment.

The family home is filled with furniture but also with memories, emotions and sentiment. The client needs to be gently urged to set aside personal feelings about the house and make a divorce decision based on cold hard facts and economics. The client needs to calculate if he or she can afford the house after the divorce. A smaller house might make a lot more sense from a financial point of view. Some clients are worried about how a move would affect their children and which school they would attend. Many people simply cannot bear the thought of all the hassle involved in moving. Some people are simply attached to their house and do not want to leave it.

The time to think about all of these considerations for the first time is not half way through mediation when the pressure is on. The lawyer must get the client thinking about this important decision early in a case. The client should be prompted to do the research and thinking (and maybe talking to the children) well before mediation.

### **Who Must/Should Move Out of the House at the Start of the Divorce?**

The Texas Family Code Sec. 6.502(a)(6) authorizes a court to award one spouse temporary exclusive use of the family residence.

Sec. 6.502. TEMPORARY INJUNCTION AND OTHER TEMPORARY ORDERS. (a) While a suit for dissolution of a marriage is pending and on the motion of a party or on the court's own motion after notice and hearing, the court may render an appropriate order, including the granting of a temporary injunction for the preservation of the property and protection of the parties as deemed necessary and equitable and including an order directed to one or both parties:

....

(6) awarding one spouse exclusive occupancy of the residence during the pendency of the case;

Note that Sec. 6.502 requires “notice and hearing” before a spouse can be awarded exclusive use of the residence.

Almost all judges assume that it is not a good idea for divorcing spouses to continue to live together while the divorce is pending (unless the spouses agree). So, at a hearing on temporary orders in a divorce, one of the spouses will be granted the exclusive use of the residence and the other spouse will be ordered to move out if that has not already happened.

There is no statutory or case law guidance for how a judge decides who stays in the house and who must leave during a divorce. Most family court judges will consider these factors:

- Which parent will have the temporary, primary custody of the children? Often, judges want the children to remain in the house during the initial months of the divorce, so it makes sense for the parent with primary custody of the kids to also get the use of the house.
- Has one spouse already moved out?
- Is the house the separate property of one party? This is a factor to consider, but in theory a court can allow a spouse exclusive use of a house that is the separate property of the other spouse. This can be done in final orders while the children are minors. *Eggemeyer v. Eggemeyer*, 554 S.W.2d 137, 138 (Tex. 1977); *Gerami v. Gerami*, 666 S.W.2d 241, 242 ) Tex. App.--Houston [14th Dist.] 1984, writ dismissed; *Villarreal v. Laredo National Bank*, 677 S.W.2d 600, 607 (Tex. App.--San Antonio 1984, writ refused n.r.e.) (en banc); *Burney v. Burney*, 225 S.W.3d 208, 220 (Tex. App. – El Paso 2006, no pet.). It has even been held that a court may award the use of one spouse's separate property home to the other spouse for a specific time period until remarriage, even if there are no minor children. In *Bush v. Bush*, 237 S.W.2d 708 (Tex. Civ. App.--Amarillo 1950, no writ), the appellate court upheld the trial court's giving the wife the right to use the husband's separate property house until she remarried. *Accord Farris v. Farris*, 15 S.W.2d 1083 (Tex. Civ. App.--San Antonio 1929, no writ) (separate property home of husband set aside to wife for life).
- Which spouse can afford the house and related payments? Of course, the Court may order temporary spousal support if needed during the divorce, so usually ability to pay is not an important issue.
- Does a party work from home and if so, what would be the impact of moving the work out of the residence be on their job or business?
- Is there some reason why one spouse cannot maintain or repair the house (or pay someone to do so). For example, if the husband is half way through laying wood flooring on the entire first floor of the house, he may want to stay to get that done.
- Does a spouse have other children (or relatives) who also live at the house?
- Has the house been modified to accommodate one spouse with disabilities?

New divorce clients often ask if they should move out of the house without a court order. Some are worried that it will be “abandonment” of the property or their children. Most lawyers respond to such concerns with this advice:

- If this is going to be a fight over custody of the children, you may not want to move out;
- If there is arguing and yelling or bad behavior in front of the children, it may be best to go stay with a relative or friend or at a hotel until we get before a judge.
- If there is violence or a serious threat of violence, we could seek a protective order that will force your spouse out of the house.
- A spouse who moves out of the house may still be awarded the house at the end of the divorce.

Clients frequently do not understand what “temporary exclusive use” of the house means. Some spouses (especially controlling husbands) will still just walk into the family residence without permission even after a court hearing. I explain the situation to clients this way:

You still are an owner of the house. It is just that while the divorce case is pending, your wife has the sole use of the house unless she invites you in or gives you permission. It is temporarily like it is just her house even though it is still yours too. Think of my house – you cannot just enter my house without my okay.

One common area of dispute between spouses when one must move out of the house involves what can be taken out of the house and what must be left. This should be a matter of agreement or at least common sense and fairness. If the children are going to primarily live at the house with the father, for example, the mother should not take out the children’s beds unless there is an agreement to do so.

**I strongly urge clients to make a video of a walk-through of the house, opening closets and drawers and looking in the garage and attic so that months later they can remember what personal property they want from the house when the divorce is being finalized.**

### **Characterization: Is the House Community Property, Separate Property or Jointly Owned Separate Property?**

The usual rules of characterization apply to houses, including the inception of title rule. This has an unusual application when it comes to real estate: ownership of real estate is traced back to the date an earnest money contract is signed. *Wierzchula v. Wierzchula*, 623 S.W.2d 730, 732 (Tex. App. - Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 1981, no writ)(guy signs earnest money contract, then gets married then closes on the house purchase during the marriage – house is his separate property!).

If a lot is separate property, but during the marriage the couple builds a house on the lot, then the house is separate property. In *re Marriage of Morris*, 12 S.W.3d 877, 881 (Tex. App. - Texarkana 2000, no pet.)(but there may be a reimbursement claim for the capital improvement!).

A spouse who purchases real estate during the marriage with her separate property, but takes title to the property in the names of both spouses is presumed to have made a gift to the other spouse of one-half interest in the property. *Cockerham v. Cockerham*, 527 S.W.2d 162, 167 (Tex.1975); *Whorrall v. Whorrall*, 691 S.W.2d 32, 35 (Tex.App. - Austin 1985, writ dismissed). This presumption may be rebutted by clear and convincing evidence that there was no intent to make a gift. *Cockerham*, 527 S.W.2d at 168; *Whorrall*, 691 S.W.2d at 35.

When one spouse buys real property during the marriage with his separate funds, but takes title in the name of the other spouse, it is presumed that there was a gift and the real estate is the separate property of the other spouse. *Powell v. Jackson*, 320 S.W.2d 20, 23 (Tex. App. - Amarillo 1958, writ refused n.r.e.). This presumption can be rebutted by clear and convincing evidence that the purchasing spouse did not intend to make a gift to the other spouse. *Id.* at 23.

A deed transferring property from one spouse to the other spouse during the marriage creates a presumption that the grantee spouse received the property as separate property by gift. *Raymond v. Raymond*, 190 S.W.3d 77, 81 (Tex. App. - Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2005, no petition.).

If a deed recites that a property purchased during the marriage is the separate property of the purchasing spouse, that rebuts the community property presumption. *Kyles v. Kyles*, 832 S.W.2d 194, 196 (Tex. App. - Beaumont 1992, no writ).

A deed which recites consideration of “ten dollars and love and affection” is a gift deed. *Babb v. McGee*, 507 S.W.2d 821 (Tex. App. - Dallas 1974, writ refused n.r.e.). When real property is conveyed by gift to both spouses as grantees, then each spouse has an undivided one-half separate interest in the property. *Raymond v. Raymond*, 190 S.W.3d 77, 81 (Tex. App. - Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2005, no petition.).

There is a presumption that a parent intends to make a gift if property is purchased in the name of the child. *Dennis v. Dennis*, 256 S.W.2d 964, 965 (Tex. Civ. App. - Amarillo 1952, no writ).

### **Refinancing Usually Does Not Change Who Owns the House.**

The court in *In re Marriage of Jordan*, 264 S.W.3d 850, 856 (Tex. App. - Waco 2008, no petition.) said:

*The fact that the home was refinanced during the marriage does not change its character as separate property although the refinancing may give rise to a claim for economic contribution or reimbursement of any community funds paid toward the refinanced debt.*

Clients often insist that their spouse’s separate property house is now community property because, “we refinanced and my name is on the deed.” The client is almost certainly partially correct because his or her name is probably on the deed of trust which allows the mortgage company to foreclose, but that is required in almost all refinances because Texas is a community property state. However, the deed of trust does not transfer ownership like a general warranty deed, it just allows for foreclosure. In the typical refinance situation, the owner of the separate property real estate would testify he or she certainly did not intend to make a gift, it was just that the mortgage company requires both spouses to sign the deed of trust since we are in a community property state. Most

importantly, the clear language of the deed of trust does not transfer ownership from one spouse to the other.

Justice Ann McClure in the recent case of *Rivera v. Hernandez*, 441 S.W.3d 413, 420 (Tex. App.— El Paso 2014, pet. denied) wrote, “Simply stated, the fact that Husband and Wife borrowed funds during marriage for which the real estate served as collateral has no effect on its characterization whatsoever.” In that case, the husband had bought the land prior to marriage and during marriage the couple built on the land and signed a designation of homestead on the property. Justice McClure wrote that the joint homestead designation did not change the separate property character of the land, but the homestead designation is why both husband and wife had to sign the loan papers secured by the land.

However, there might be a few unusual situations where a refinance does transfer ownership. A deed for property from one spouse as grantor to the other spouse as grantee creates a presumption the grantee spouse received the property as separate property by gift. *Raymond v. Raymond*, 190 S.W.3d 77, 81 (Tex. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] 2005, no pet.); *Roberts*, 999 S.W.2d at 432. The presumption may be rebutted by proof the deed was procured by fraud, accident, or mistake. *Raymond*, 190 S.W.3d at 81; *Roberts*, 999 S.W.2d at 431. There are two cases where these principles and the wording of deeds signed during the refinancing resulted in one spouse’s separate property being converted into jointly owned separate property with the other spouse owning 50%!

*In re Marriage of Skarda*, 2011 WL 2502946 (Tex.App. - Amarillo 2011)(No. 07-09-00191-CV)(June 23, 2011) involved a husband who bought a property in 2002, got married in 2004 and refinanced in 2006. In addition to the usual joint deed of trust, the closing on this refinance also involved the husband and wife signing as grantees a warranty deed conveying the property to themselves as "joint tenants with right of survivorship." Despite that the fact that the wife at the time of refinancing apparently did not have any ownership of the property, the deed’s granting clause identified the grantor as “Gregory Skarda, a married man and joined by his spouse Vicki Skarda,” and its grantee as “Gregory Skarda and Vicki Skarda, husband and wife as joint tenants with right of survivorship.” The husband testified he did not intend to make a gift to his wife and the wife asserted the land was now community property.

The Amarillo Court of Appeals said:

*Here, trial began with the presumption that the FM 1264 property was community property. Without dispute from Vicki, inception of title in Gregory before marriage was established. The January 17 deed created a joint tenancy in the FM 1264 property in Gregory and Vicki. Otherwise, evidence of characterization was meager. Gregory testified he intended only to refinance the property and not give a half interest to Vicki. Vicki agreed she received a one-half interest in the property by gift "or otherwise" but also agreed the property was community in which she owned a one-half interest by deed. There was no evidence the January 17 deed was procured by fraud, accident, or mistake. By its nature, the joint tenancy created in Vicki by the January 17 deed was her separate property. On this record, we are unable to say the trial court abused its discretion in finding Vicki received a one-half interest in the FM 1264 property by gift.*

*Magness v. Magness*, 241 S.W.3d 910 (Tex. App. - Dallas 2007, pet. denied) also involved a refinance, but this time it was the wife who owned the house prior to marriage. The house was refinanced five years into the marriage and the wife signed a deed showing both spouses as grantees transferring a one-half interest in the house to the husband. The wife testified that she signed the deed as a condition of the refinancing and she did not intend to make a gift. The husband never testified about the transaction. The trial court found that each spouse owned 50% of the house as his and her separate property and the court of appeals affirmed.

The cases on the refinancing of separate property homes during a marriage can be summarized as follows: the house is still separate property after a refinance unless more than just the usual deed of trust is signed by both spouses. Ownership changes only if the owner spouse signs a deed that transfers ownership to the other spouse and most refinances do not involve such a deed.

### **A House Bought in One Person's Name Before Marriage Can Still Be Jointly Owed Separate Property**

A man and woman lived together with her children and the man signed an earnest money contract and closed on the purchase of a home solely in his name. Then the couple got married. When the inevitable divorce occurs, most lawyers would assume the house is the husband's separate property because he purchased it in his own name prior to marriage. Yet, in *Aaron v. Aaron*, No. 14-10-00765-CV (Tex. App. Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 1/31/2012)(mem. op.), Judge David Farr and then the Fourteenth Court of Appeals found the house was jointly owned separate property. The moral to this story is for lawyers to not assume and not give up on a house purchased before marriage when the man and woman (or man and man and woman and woman) were a couple (albeit unmarried).

In *Aaron v. Aaron*, the Court of Appeals said:

*The Green Top Residence was acquired on May 28, 1999, prior to Daryl and Kimberly's marriage. Daryl and Kimberly planned to purchase the Green Top Residence together and, on April 23, 1999, they signed an earnest money contract for the purchase of the home. However, Kimberly learned that her credit was poor and that they could purchase the home for a lower interest rate if the home were purchased in Daryl's name alone. Daryl alone signed a second earnest money contract and the closing documents were in Daryl's name alone.*

*Kimberly testified that, even though the home was to be purchased in Daryl's name alone, they still had an agreement to be joint owners of the Green Top Residence. Because Kimberly was not able to contribute as much towards the down payment as Daryl, Daryl paid a down payment of \$6,700. An additional \$1,366.04 was required for closing costs. The parties dispute who paid the additional \$1,366.04. The \$1,366.04 check showed Daryl as the remittor, but Kimberly testified that she provided the funds, and Daryl told her to put his name as remittor on the check because all the closing documents were in his name alone. To make up for Daryl's having paid more of the down payment on the house, Kimberly paid the mortgage and utilities for the first six months while Daryl was selling a house he had owned previously. After Daryl had sold his house, he started making the Green Top mortgage payments, while Kimberly paid for the food and the utilities. Kimberly*

*testified that the amount she paid monthly for food and utilities would be about the same as the monthly mortgage payment.*

....

*Daryl, on other hand, argued that, because he acquired the Green Top residence prior to marriage, it is his separate property, and the trial court was prohibited from dividing that property. The trial court found that, even after Daryl and Kimberly had decided that the house would be purchased in Daryl's name alone, they purchased the Green Top Residence jointly and intended to be joint owners of the house, and that Kimberly paid one-half of the down payment and closing costs. The trial court concluded that Daryl and Kimberly jointly owned the Green Top Residence as tenants in common, each owning a one-half, undivided separate property interest in the house.*

....

*Here, it is undisputed that the parties initially agreed to buy a home together. There is evidence that the parties looked for house together and chose this house so that Kimberly's children could continue to attend the same schools. There is also evidence that the parties agreed that the home would be purchased in Daryl's name only due to Kimberly's poor credit, and that the parties had agreed on how to handle the payment of the mortgage and expenses. Thus, there is evidence to support the trial court's finding that Daryl and Kimberly owned the Green Top Residence as tenants in common. We overrule Daryl's first issue.*

A similar result was reached in *Harrington v. Harrington*, 742 S.W.2d 722 (Tex. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] 1987, no writ). The trial judge and then the Court of Appeals found that the house purchased prior to marriage solely in the husband's name was jointly owned separate property. The *Harrington* decision states:

*The court found, inter alia, that the parties began to live together in December 1971; that they were ceremonially married on December 18, 1977; and that they stopped living together as husband and wife on May 30, 1985. The court found that they lived in leased residences in their joint names from 1972 until the purchase of the Talbot Street residence; that in the spring of 1975, the parties agreed to look for a home to purchase in West University Place; that they looked for prospective homes together for a period of approximately three months; that both parties agreed on the choice of the home to purchase, i.e., the Talbot Street property; and that both parties attended the closing of the sale of the Talbot Street house. The court further found that at the time of purchase, the appellee had a bachelor's degree in journalism; that the appellant had a master of business degree in finance and had taken courses in business law; and that at that time of the purchase, the appellee was terminating her employment to attend law school full time.*

*The court further found that at the time of the purchase of the home, the parties agreed that title to the property would be taken in the appellant's name, at appellant's suggestion, for credit purposes and convenience only, but intended the residence to be owned, used, and enjoyed jointly. The parties expended labor and money in improvements to the home and*

*planned to use the appellee's separate property funds to remodel the home. Finally, the court found that the reason for the marriage was to have children and that the appellee became pregnant immediately after the parties married.*

*The trial court concluded that the parties entered into an oral partnership/joint venture to own and occupy the home located on Talbot Street jointly; that they took title to the home in appellant's name for convenience and credit purposes only; and that the parties owned the home as tenants in common.*

742 S.W.2d at 723-4.

The *Aaron* and *Harrington* case appear to be the only reported cases on this specific topic in Texas and both allowed a wife's testimony to support a finding that a house purchased by the husband prior to marriage was jointly owned separate property.

### **Partition of Jointly Owned Separate Property**

There are at least four situations when a house might be characterized as jointly owned separate property:

1. The house was jointly purchased before marriage;
2. The house was gifted to both spouses during the marriage, see e.g. *White v. White*, 590 S.W.2d 587 (Tex. Civ. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] 1979, no writ);
3. A spouse with a separate property house makes a gift of a half interest to the other spouse, see e.g. *Motley v. Motley*, 390 S.W.3d 689 (Tex. App. - Dallas 2012, no pet.; or
4. A house was inherited and left to both spouses.

A court cannot award a house that is jointly owned separate property to one of the spouses because a court cannot divest a party of his or her separate property. *White v. White*, 590 S.W.2d 587 (Tex. Civ. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] 1979, no writ).

The spouses who jointly own a separate property house can reach an agreement that allows one spouse to buy the other out, either for cash or an award of some other item of community property. However, a divorce court judge cannot order a buy-out of separate property that is jointly owned because that would violate the rule that a court cannot divest a party of his or separate property. *Eggemeyer v. Eggemeyer*, 554 S.W.2d 137 (Tex.1977)

If the spouses cannot agree on what to do with joint owned separate property, the only options for a trial judge in a divorce case involving jointly owned separate property are:

1. Leave the divorcing spouses as co-owners; or

2. If either party requests a partition, the judge must decide if the property can be physically divided (partition in kind) or if it cannot be literally divided, then order the house sold (partition by sale).

The court in *Halamka v. Halamka*, 799 S.W.2d 351, 354 (Tex. App. - Texarkana 1990, no writ) stated:

*A partitioning of separate property is not a part of a divorce proceeding. TEX.FAM.CODE ANN. § 3.63 authorizes a division "of the estate of the parties." The "estate" to be divided in a divorce proceeding is the community estate. To hold that the term "estate of the parties" as used in Section 3.63 encompasses separate as well as community property violates the legislative intent in view of the historic use of the phrase as referring only to community property.*

*The trial court could, however, divide the property in a partition proceeding, and this would be done under the general laws pertaining to partition suits between co-tenants, not under the laws applicable to a divorce action. On appeal, there is no complaint about the partitioning of the separate property, and there is no prohibition against the trial court's considering a partition action concurrently with the divorce proceeding. Applying the laws of a partition action, the trial court determined that the house and twenty-four acres were incapable of partition in kind and that equity required an immediate partition by sale through a receiver appointed by the court.*

(Citations omitted)

Partition of jointly owned property is governed by very specific procedures in Texas Rules of Civil procedure 756 - 771. Texas law favors partition in kind over partition by sale. *Cecola v. Ruley*, 12 S.W.3d 848, 853 (Tex. App. - Texarkana 2000, no pet.). "Partition in kind" means the property is literally divided - I get the eastern 3 acres and you get the house and the western 1.2 acres, for example. Partition by sale means the house is ordered sold and the owners split the proceeds.

TRCP 770 says, "Should the court be of the opinion that a fair and equitable division of the real estate, or any part thereof, cannot be made, it shall order a sale of so much as is incapable of partition...." Courts have explained that, although the Rule seems to provide that the property must be "incapable" of partition in kind, the Rule "does not mean incapable in a physical sense." *Cecola*, 12 S.W.3d at 855. The inquiry is focused on whether partition in kind is "fair and equitable," which includes whether "property can be divided in kind without materially impairing its value." *Id.* The party seeking partition by sale bears the burden of proving a partition in kind would not be fair and equitable. Usually, a house on a typical city lot cannot be partitioned in kind and must be sold.

Divorcing spouses who are joint owners of separate property are better off agreeing to sell a property and deciding for themselves who the realtor and what the terms of sale are. TRCP 770 provides for the appointment by the court of a receiver to sell the property.

Unlike most other proceedings, a partition case involves two judgments, both of which are final for purposes of appeal. *Carr v. Langford*, 144 S.W.2d 612, 613 (Tex. Civ. App. - Dallas 1940),

*aff'd*, 138 Tex. 330, 159 S.W.2d 107, 108 (Tex. 1942). This is because a partition proceeding is a two-step process. *Yturria v. Kimbro*, 921 S.W.2d 338, 341 (Tex. App. - Corpus Christi 1996, no writ). In a suit to partition real property, the steps are:<sup>[1]</sup>

1. The trial court determines the interest owned by each party in the property. For example, in *Johnson v. Evans*, No. 14-08-00610-CV (Tex. App. – Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 2/9/2010)(mem. op.), “the trial court determined that the Evanses owned an undivided 7/8 interest in Tract 1 and the Jasper heirs owned the remaining undivided 1/8 interest. As to Tract 2, the trial court determined that the Evanses owned an undivided 1/2 interest and the Jasper heirs and Johnson owned the other 1/2 interest.” In this case, the trial court never ruled on what percentage each party legally owned in the property.
2. The trial court decides any questions of law or equity. One question of equity that the trial court can decide is a claim for equitable reimbursement. “The common law recognizes an action for equitable reimbursement. When two persons are cotenants and one of them incurs expense in the improvement of the property which is necessary and beneficial, it is equitable that the one incurring the expense shall have contribution from his cotenant in an amount which is in proportion to the undivided interest owned by such cotenant.” *Ramos v. Unknown Heirs of Gonzalez*, No. 04-14-00667-CV (Tex. App. – San Antonio, April 27, 2016, no pet. hist.)(mem. op.).
3. The trial court decides if the property can literally be divided or the property should be sold and the proceeds divided.
  - A. If the property is to be divided, commissioners are appointed to decide on the division of the land.
  - B. If the property is to be sold, the court appoints a receiver to sell the property. See e.g. *In re Moran*, 635 S.W.3d 394 (Tex. App. – Beaumont 2021)(orig. proc.).

## How to Value the House

It has long been the rule in Texas that the owner of a property can testify as to the property’s value even if the homeowner cannot qualify as an expert witness. *Mata v. Mata*, 710 S.W.2d 745, 758 (Tex. App. - Corpus Christi 1986, no writ). However, some courts have held that the owner should show she has some familiarity with the market for that particular property. *Young v. Young*, 168

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<sup>[1]</sup> “The Property Code allows a joint owner or claimant of an interest in a piece of real property to "compel a partition of the interest or the property among the joint owners or claimants," Tex. Prop. Code Ann. § 23.001, and that right to partition is absolute. When the right to partition is invoked, the trial court must determine the interest owned by each owner, any questions of law or equity, and whether the property is susceptible to partition. Tex. R. Civ. P. 760, 761. If the court finds that a fair and equitable partition can be made, the court should order the partition, specifying each party's interest, and appoint disinterested commissioners to divide the property in accordance with those interests. Tex. R. Civ. P. 761. If partition in kind would be unfair or inequitable, the property shall be sold and the proceeds divided according to the parties' respective shares.” *Jimmie Luecke Children Partnership, Ltd. v. Pruncutz*, No. 03-03-00388-CV, 2005 WL 910144 (Tex. App.—Austin, Apr. 21, 2005, pet. denied) (mem. op.)(case citations omitted).

S.W.3d 276, 285 (Tex. App. - Dallas 2005, no pet.). A property owner could testify, for example, that she consulted Zillow and got two realtor's CMA's (see below).

The divorce lawyer can look to four sources for the value of a house or other real estate:

1. Comparative Market Analysis by a Real Estate agent - free, quick, and often good enough for mediation or settlement. Texas realtors are allowed to give a broker's opinions of price, which represents the estimated sales price of the property. Realtors cannot testify about a property's fair market value.

Enos Family Law uses Haley Flynn (phone: 832-566-0246; e-mail: [haley@haleysellshomes.com](mailto:haley@haleysellshomes.com)) to prepare a free market analysis because that firm produces really detailed, impressive looking valuation reports for free. The realtor does not have to even go to the home but should be sent some digital photographs of the house.

2. Zillow – “Zestimates” for off-market homes (those not listed) have a national median error rate of 7.49% of the eventual sale price. Only 60.6% of off market Zestimates are within 10% of the eventual sales price according to Zillow. Zillow tends to be more accurate on listed homes because its algorithm takes advantage of realtor's experience and reflects the list price.
3. Central Appraisal District - historically, CAD values were always low.
4. Look at the property owner's financial statements and loan applications to see what they indicate the property is worth. This would be an admission against interest per Tex. R. Evid. 801(e)(2). If the property is owned by a company, look at its balance sheet to see what it values the property at.
5. A formal appraisal by a licensed real estate appraiser (averages \$500 for residential properties). [http://www.uspap.org/USPAP/frwr/uspap\\_toc.htm](http://www.uspap.org/USPAP/frwr/uspap_toc.htm). Real estate appraisers use three methods to value real estate:
  - A. Comparable sales approach - the key is to ask whether the comparable properties really are comparable and whether the comparable sales were close enough in time to be relevant. See the discussion in *Exxon Corp. v. Middleton*, 613 S.W.2d 240, 246 (Tex. 1981). A very subjective part of the comparative sales approach is the final step in which the appraiser adjusts the comparable sales numbers up or down depending on differences between the comparable properties (including the condition of the property to be sold).
  - B. Income approach - if the real estate produces income (e.g. - a rent house), future income is estimated and then divided by a capitalization rate (which is a very subjective determination).

- C. Cost approach - if there are no comparable sales and the property does not produce income, then the appraiser can estimate the cost to replace the property.

As a practical matter, residential real estate is almost always appraised using the comparable sales approach. The lawyer who wants to cross-examine the appraiser usually focuses on: (1) the condition of the property and what it will cost to repair the house and get it in salable condition, and (2) whether the other properties used as comparables are really similar to the subject property. For example, this house is on a cul-de-sac unlike the Smith's home and this house was a foreclosure and this house says it has three bedrooms but wasn't one really a poorly converted garage?

Enos Family Law usually uses these real estate appraisers:

<p><b>Russell Wayne Tucker</b> <b>JLS Appraisals</b> 307 Pineview Cir El Lago, Texas 77586 (713) 899-1735 <a href="mailto:russell@jlsappraisals.com">russell@jlsappraisals.com</a></p>
<p><b>Robert Abbott</b> <b>Abbott Real Estate Co.</b> 8511 Westerbrook Ln Humble, Texas 77396 (832) 259-4078 <a href="mailto:robert@abbottrealestateco.com">robert@abbottrealestateco.com</a></p>
<p><b>Brad Page</b> <b>APEX Appraisals, Inc.</b> (832) 643-2723</p>

### **The Cost of Sale Is Not Usually Deducted From the Value of a House in a Texas Divorce**

A divorce court in Texas should usually not reduce the value of a house because of closing costs and realtor fees because that approach is not consistent with the definition of "fair market value," and because such closing costs are too speculative. There is no definitive Texas case law on point, but the majority of other states have held that closing costs should not be considered in the value of a house unless a sale is actually imminent or planned.

Two older Texas cases could be interpreted to approve of reducing the value of a house in a divorce by the cost of sale. In *Pelzig v. Berkebile*, 931 S.W.2d 398, 403 (Tex. App. - Corpus Christi 1996, no writ), the court of appeals said, "The judge's finding of a \$99,000 value after deducting ten percent closing costs was within the range of values suggested by the evidence." In *Cole v. Cole*, 880 S.W.2d 477, 484 (Tex. App. - Fort Worth 1994, no writ), it is not clear at all what method the trial court used in finding the house had a net value of \$180,440. An appraiser testified about a range of possible values and estimated closing costs. The court of appeals upheld the trial court and said, "It is possible that the court started with the figure of \$275,000 because it took into account the various deductions that would be made for closing costs and taxes." Neither of these

cases involved an appellant specifically challenging the trial court's deduction of sales costs from the value of a house. In *Pelzig v. Berkebile*, the parties apparently both agreed to deduct the cost of sale from the value. It was not clear even to the court of appeals what methodology the trial court used in *Cole v. Cole* to value the house and there are no other Texas cases on point.

Case law and the Texas Pattern Jury Charge define "fair market value" as "the amount that would be paid in cash by a willing buyer who desires to buy, but is not required to buy, to a willing seller who desires to sell, but is under no necessity of selling." Texas Pattern Jury Charges - Family & Probate (2012), PJC 203.1. The amount paid in cash by a willing buyer for a house is the total amount paid and the definition does not say "the net amount the seller walks away with after paying all costs and fees." If I sell my house to Tristan Longino for \$650,000, the fair market value is \$650,000 and not what I net after paying the real estate agent and all closing costs. The mortgage is taken into account in a divorce because it is a current community debt. If there are no current plans to actually sell the house, the amount of realtor fees and closing costs is speculative. It is likely a real estate broker will be used but some houses are sold directly without an agent. In some cases, the broker's fee is negotiated down from the usual six percent. Other typical closing costs for a seller include the cost of title insurance (which is negotiable and not always paid by the seller) and prorated property taxes and homeowners association dues (which are not paid in many situations). It is thus impossible to predict accurately what the cost of sale for a particular house will be, especially if the house is not for sale and may not be sold for years or decades. In a divorce, the trial court properly may not consider liabilities that are uncertain and speculative. *Means v. Means*, 535 S.W.2d 911, 914 (Tex. App. - Amarillo 1976, no writ)(trial court properly did not consider the potential liability of lawsuits against the husband's business because they were too speculative).

Courts from the vast majority of other states have held that the value of a house should only be reduced by the costs of sale if there is evidence in the record of an imminent sale and evidence of the estimated costs of sale. *In re Marriage of Berg*, 737 P.2d 680, 683 (Wash. App. 1987); *McDaniel v. McDaniel*, 829 P.2d 303 (Alaska 1992); *Coviello v. Coviello*, 605 A.2d 661 (Md. App. 1992); *Virgin v. Virgin*, 990 P.2d 1040, 1049 (Alaska 1999); *In re Marriage of Kopplin*, 703 P.2d 251, 253 (Or. App. 1985); *In re Marriage of Stenshoel*, 866 P.2d 635, 641-42 (Wash. App. 1993). See also *Taber v. Taber*, 626 So.2d 1089, 1089-90 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1993); *In re Marriage of Benkendorf*, 624 N.E.2d 1241, 1245-46 (Ill. App. 1993); *Carlson v. Carlson*, 487 S.E.2d 784, 786-87 (N.C. App. 1997); *Waldow V. Wadlow*, 491 A.2d 757 (N.J. App. Div. 1985). A minority of states have approved deduction of closing costs from the value of a home even if the parties do not expect to sell the house in the near future. See e.g., *Abrams v. Abrams*, 516 N.W.2d 348, 350-351 (S.D. 1994).

## **Reimbursement Claims and the House**

Reimbursement claims are hard to explain to clients and it is unclear to most attorneys how to prove and value such claims. Since reimbursement claims are equitable in nature, it is totally up to the judge whether or not to grant a reimbursement claim, how to value it and what to do about it. Reimbursement claims are not easy to win if the law is followed.

The Texas Legislature in 2023 rewrote the law on reimbursement claims, so beware of any articles and many appellate cases that pre-date the new law.

Reimbursement claims are a very complex subject and you should consult with the comprehensive paper written by Greg Enos in 2024 on this subject.

The two most common scenarios involving the family home where reimbursement is sought involve: (1) use of community property funds to pay a loan secured by a separate property, such as the mortgage on a separate property house, or (2) use of community funds to improve a separate property asset, such as using community property funds to paint and carpet a separate property house. Either claim requires the attorney to convince the judge that:

1. There were separate property funds available to pay the debt or pay for the improvement. This requirement is not set forth in the statute, but how else could the judge find that the debt or improvement should have been paid using separate funds if there were no separate funds available?
2. The debt or improvement in equity and good conscience should have been paid from separate property funds.
3. Unjust enrichment of the separate estate will occur if the separate estate is not required to reimburse the community estate.

In the situation where community funds were used to improve a separate property asset, the lawyer must also provide evidence of how much the value of the separate property was enhanced by the improvement. That is not always easy to do.

A trial court that grants a claim for reimbursement could:

1. Consider the reimbursement claim in the division of community property if there is enough community property.
2. Grant a judgment in favor of one spouse against the other spouse.
3. Grant an equitable lien against the separate property that was benefitted and was the subject of the reimbursement claim, which would involve awarding one spouse a judgment and ordering the other spouse to sign a real estate lien note and deed of trust in that amount secured by a lien on one of the spouse's properties that was the subject of the reimbursement claim.

A reimbursement claim involving the family residence cannot be offset by the fact the family got to use the house. Texas Family Code Sec. 3.402(g)(1) states:

(g) A claim for reimbursement of a marital estate by one spouse may be offset by the value of any related benefit that the other spouse proves that the conferring estate received from the benefitted estate, including:

- (1) the value of the use and enjoyment of the property by the conferring estate, except that the separate marital estate of a spouse may not claim an offset for use and enjoyment of a primary or secondary residence owned wholly or partly by the

separate marital estate against contributions made by the community marital estate to the separate marital estate;

### **How the House is Divided in a Divorce?**

The judge's options in a divorce trial regarding the residence are:

1. Confirm the house as one spouse's separate property
2. Award the community property house to the husband or to the wife
3. Order the house sold (see discussion below)
4. Award the house to one spouse but allow the other spouse to live in the house for a specific period of time
5. Partition the real estate if that is possible (a house in a suburb could not be partitioned but a house on 220 acres in the country could be partitioned - one spouse gets the house and five acres and the other spouse gets the remaining 215 acres)
6. Award the house to one spouse and award the other spouse a money judgment secured by the house (the divorce decree would contain a judgment and owelty lien and one spouse would be ordered to sign a real estate lien note and owelty deed of trust).

The judge will have to address the mortgage secured by the house (and possibly a home equity loan also). Usually, the party who is awarded the house is responsible for the mortgage. However, a judge could make the spouse not awarded the house pay the mortgage.

### **What To Do About the Joint Mortgage?**

Attorneys often do not discuss with their clients how they will be effected by the mortgage that is in both names once they are divorced.

If, for example, the husband is awarded the house and ordered to pay the joint mortgage, the wife needs to be told:

1. The divorce decree does not take your name off the mortgage. Late payments by your husband will affect your credit rating.
2. If you want to buy a house, your ability to qualify for your own mortgage will not be effected by this joint mortgage at it will not impact your debt-to-income ratio. As long as the divorce decree clearly makes the spouse awarded the house responsible for paying the mortgage, the other spouse should not be impacted when he or she applies for another mortgage (as long as it is being paid on time).

The options for getting a spouse's name off the joint mortgage include:

1. The spouse awarded the house is ordered to refinance within xx days of the date of divorce (the refinance cannot happen until after the divorce and only after the general warranty deed has transferred ownership solely to that spouse). Often, the spouse who gets the house cannot qualify for a mortgage in his or her own name however.
2. The spouse awarded the house can sometimes sign documents to assume sole responsibility for the mortgage. Most mortgage companies have a process for this and assumption is cheaper than refinancing. An assumption may cost \$\_\_ in fees.
3. The house is ordered sold.

The Mediated Settlement Agreement and the divorce decree can order the spouse who is awarded the house and responsibility for the associated loan to timely pay the mortgage, using language like:

*SALLY ROBINSON is ORDERED to timely pay each mortgage payment on or before the date it is due.*

Attorneys will explain to their divorce clients that a Deed of Trust to Secure Assumption (DOTSA) if a house secured by a joint mortgage is awarded to the other spouse. Assume Juan and Betty own a house that is secured by a mortgage in both names and in the divorce Juan is awarded the house. Ordinarily, Betty would sign a Special Warranty Deed to transfer her interest in the house to Juan and Juan would also sign a DOTSA that would allow Betty to foreclose on Juan if he defaults on the joint mortgage. The problem is that Betty's credit rating is still effected by Juan's late payments and by the time Betty could actually complete a foreclosure, Juan's failure to pay would have really hurt her credit rating.

### **Order to Refinance**

A refinance of an existing mortgage should be part of a divorce settlement only if it has been confirmed prior to the settlement that the spouse to be awarded the house can qualify for a new mortgage. In a Texas divorce, the trial court can order a spouse to refinance or sell the home. . *Cyree v. Cyree*, No. 03-21-00319-CV (Tex. App.-Austin Dec. 22, 2022, no pet.) (mem. op.); *Owsley v. Owsley*, No. 13-18-00636-CV (Tex. App.-Corpus Christi-Edinburg Nov. 10, 2022, no pet.) (mem. op.).

*In re Marriage of Cooper*, No. 06-22-00093-CV (Tex. App. - Texarkana, June 2, 2023)(mem. op.) upheld the trial court's divorce decree which required the husband to either refinance the former family residence solely in his name and pay the wife \$40,000.00 or sell the house and pay the wife fifty-seven percent of the proceeds from the sale.

## How to Get the Equity Out of the Family Residence

The sale of the family residence is the easiest way to get the equity out of the house to divide between the parties. If one spouse is going to continue to own the house after the divorce, the options for paying the other spouse for his or her share of the home equity include:

1. The other spouse is awarded some other asset to offset the equity. So, if the wife is getting the house with \$80,000 of equity, then the husband might get \$40,000 more of the wife's savings account. Sometimes, there are no other assets to balance out the award of equity to one spouse or, for example, the award of part of a 401(k)-retirement plan is not the same as cash out of a house because the retirement money is still taxable.
2. One spouse is awarded the house and he or she agrees to refinance the house with a "cash out" refinance within a specific period of time (e.g. - within 120 days of divorce) or to get a home equity loan after the divorce. However, sometimes the spouse who wants the house cannot qualify for a refinance or home equity loan because of his or her income or credit score. Under Texas law, homeowners are limited to only cashing in on equity up to 80% of the value of the property.
3. The divorce decree creates an owelty lien which allows the spouses to divide the equity and provides numerous advantages. Texas law allows an "owelty partition" pursuant to Texas Constitution Art. XVI, Sec. (50(a)(3)), which allows the owners of a home to access the equity they have in the home to assist in dividing the property. An owelty partition establishes a lien against the property for the party wishing to cash in on their interest. Without an owelty lien, the parties would be limited to only cashing in on equity up to 80% of the value of the property under Texas law. The owelty lien allows the parties to recoup their equity up to 95% of the property's value (although as a practical matter many lenders will not lend beyond 90% of the property's value). The owelty partition also allows the refinancing spouse to obtain a regular refinance instead of a home equity loan. That is very important because it affords the borrower lower rates and better terms.

The mechanics of owelty liens are discussed in detail below.

Consider this example: Adam and Sally are getting divorced and they own a home together with a mortgage. Their home is valued at \$300,000 and the couple currently owes \$150,000. Let's assume they agree that Adam will keep the house and that they will split the equity 50/50 (or \$75,000 each). Their divorce decree must specify the owelty partition and lien and an owelty deed must be recorded with the county clerk. Adam would then refinance the property at \$225,000: the \$150,000 owed on the mortgage in addition to Sally's \$75,000 owelty lien. The end result is Sally gets her \$75,000 and Adam is the full owner of the home. Sally is no longer on the mortgage nor the deed. Of course, Adam must be able to qualify for the \$225,000 loan.

The attorney must also prepare a Deed of Trust to Secure Owelty of Partition (TFLPM Form 24-10).

Two important considerations with an owelty loan are the cost of the refinance, taxes and insurance. A refinance is not free and can cost quite a bit depending upon the loan amount. The cost of the refinance should be incorporated in the division of property. If an escrow account is in place for taxes and insurance, the funds in the account should also be considered in the division of property. If an escrow account is not in place, the division of property should address who is responsible for paying the upcoming taxes and insurance, and in what proportions. In cases without an escrow account, it may be fair to consider that the departing spouse owes taxes and insurance for the portion of the year prior to the divorce being finalized.

With an owelty partition and lien in the divorce decree and a recorded owelty deed, the owning spouse--after the divorce has been finalized--may now refinance the property solely into his or her name and use proceeds from refinancing to pay-off the money judgement/note. Making this happen, of course, rests on the assumption that the spouse who will receive sole title can qualify for refinancing and sufficient equity exists to execute the buy-out. Once everything has been completed, the non-owning spouse executes a release of lien and his or her name is off the deed and mortgage.

**Any spouse who wants to keep the family residence after the divorce should meet with a mortgage broker or loan company before mediation to confirm that he or she can qualify for a loan on the house.**

#### **14. Owelty of Partition**

An owelty lien and owelty deed are part of a transaction often used in divorces to pay one spouse for his or her share of the equity in a jointly owed house or piece of real estate. For example, assume a house is bought by a couple during their marriage. At the time of their divorce settlement, the house is worth \$450,000 and \$200,000 is owed on the joint mortgage on the home. So, for this example, there is \$250,000 in equity in the house. If the husband is going to be awarded the house in the divorce, he may not have enough cash to pay the wife \$125,000 for her share of the equity at the time of divorce. He could agree to pay her the \$125,000 within 90 days because he plans to refinance the mortgage using a “cash out” refinance or maybe he will pay the ex-wife \$2,000 a month for 62.5 months (plus more for interest). Another option can occur when a teenager is going to live in the house with the parent awarded the home and the plan is to sell the house in three years when the child graduates high school. In each of these examples, the owelty lien is used to make sure the husband pays the wife for her equity in the house. It is complicated, but the owelty lien is needed because otherwise the Texas Constitution protects the owner of a homestead from judgment creditors, but one except is the owelty lien.

Interest is usually part of this sort of arrangement. If the husband agrees to pay the wife her \$125,000 at \$2,000 a month, that will take over 5 years to pay the wife off. During those five years, the husband has the equity and the wife does not. It would only be fair for the wife to get a reasonable rate of interest on the \$125,000, otherwise she is not really receiving \$125,000. Actually, if you use a discount rate of 4%, the present value of \$125,000 paid over 60 months in the future is only \$113,117. So, it is normally fair and common sense to include interest in an owelty transaction.

These are the documents involved in the owelty lien process:

Settlement Agreement or Mediated Settlement Agreement:

The divorce settlement agreement must say how much one spouse is to pay the other and say the payment will be secured by an owelty lien for \$\_\_ (amount) payable as follows \_\_ (terms of payment) with \_\_% interest (or say no interest). It is best if the agreement says what documents will be drafted and signed. An example of language for a settlement agreement would be:

XX shall pay YYY the sum of \$\_\_\_ secured by an owelty lien on the property at \_\_\_ payable as follows: \_\_\_\_\_ [describe terms] with \_\_%. Attorney for \_\_ shall draft the documents the parties shall be ordered to sign: Owelty Deed of Trust, Special Warranty Deed with Encumbrance for Owelty of Partition, Real Estate Lien Note, Deed of Trust to Secure Assumption (as to existing mortgage). YYY shall be ordered to sign and deliver a release owelty lien within 5 days of payment in full.

Divorce Decree

This is the suggested language from the 2022 Texas Family Law Practice Manual (form 23-1, 11.D) for an owelty transaction:

The Court, having awarded the family homestead of the parties to [Petitioner/Respondent], finds that it is necessary to impose an encumbrance for owelty of partition against the entirety of the property to secure the payment of the debt resulting from the award.

IT IS ORDERED AND DECREED that an encumbrance for owelty of partition is imposed against the entirety of the homestead property described as follows: [**legal description**].

The purpose of the encumbrance is to secure the payment of the debt of [Petitioner/Respondent] in favor of [Respondent/Petitioner] of [**number**] dollars (\$**amount**), resulting from the award of the homestead in this divorce proceeding. The debt shall bear interest at [**percent**] percent per year and shall be payable as follows: [**describe terms of payment of the debt**].

To further evidence the debt, [Petitioner/Respondent] is ORDERED to sign a note payable to [Respondent/Petitioner] in the amount of the debt specified above and payable according to the terms specified above. [Petitioner/Respondent] is FURTHER ORDERED to sign a deed of trust to secure payment of the debt resulting from the owelty of partition.

This debt is part of the division of community property between the parties and shall not constitute or be interpreted to be any form of spousal support, alimony, or child support.

Experience with people refusing to sign releases of liens makes me suggest that this sentence be added to the divorce decree also:

XXX is ORDERED to sign and deliver to YYY a release of owelty lien within five business days of the date that the above debt of \$\_\_ plus all interest is paid in full.

The divorce decree should also order the parties to appear and sign the necessary documents, using language such as:

Transfer and Delivery of Property

IT IS ORDERED AND DECREED that Petitioner, Gary Charles Lister shall appear at the offices of David L. Thornton, 699 S. Friendswood Drive, Suite 105, Friendswood, Texas 77546, to execute and deliver to Mary Lister on or before May 1, 2024, at 4:00 p.m. unless the document has been delivered to David L. Thornton prior to that date:

1. Special Warranty Deed with Encumbrance for Owelty of Partition for the property located at 20016 Elm, Friendswood, Texas (signed by both parties).

IT IS ORDERED AND DECREED that Petitioner, Mary Lister shall appear at the offices of Enos Family Law, 17207 Feather Craft Lane, Webster, Texas 77598, to execute and deliver to Gary Charles Lister on or before May 1, 2024, at 4:00 p.m. unless the document has been delivered to Enos Family Law prior to that date:

1. Special Warranty Deed with Encumbrance for Owelty of Partition for the property located at 20016 Elm, Friendswood, Texas (signed by both parties);
2. Deed of Trust to Secure Owelty of Partition;
3. Real Estate Lien Note;
4. Deed of Trust to Secure Assumption (as to existing mortgage).

Special Warranty Deed with Encumbrance for Owelty of Partition: (ALWAYS NECESSARY): This document conveys interest the grantor's and makes the conveyance contingent on payment of the agreed amount (with interest). This deed is unusual in that both parties, grantor and grantee, sign the deed. The grantee is the spouse who is awarded the house and the grantor is the one who is to receive payment secured by the owelty lien.

Deed of Trust to Secure Owelty of Partition: The Deed of Trust to Secure Owelty Partition perfects the owelty lien when the document is filed with the county clerk. The divorce decree sets forth the agreement/order to create the owelty lien and the owelty deed of trust filed in the county real estate records actually establishes it. In this document, the grantor is the spouse awarded the house and the beneficiary is the spouse who is to be paid in the future.

Owely Real Estate Lien Note: The suggested language from the 2022 Texas Family Law Practice Manual (form 23-1, 11.D) for an owely transaction assumes a real estate lien note will be signed as part of the owely transaction:

To further evidence the debt, [Petitioner/Respondent] is ORDERED to sign a note payable to [Respondent/Petitioner] in the amount of the debt specified above and payable according to the terms specified above.

The real estate lien note may not be absolutely required because the language in the divorce decree sets forth the terms of payment and it is the decree and the Special Warranty Deed with Encumbrance for Owely of Partition which create the owely interest. Some Internet articles published by self-proclaimed experts on owely refinance loans (who are often not attorneys) say the real estate lien note is not needed. Creating and signing a real estate lien note does not hurt either party and I think from the point of view of the spouse who is to be owed the money, the real estate lien note is yet another safeguard to make sure the money is paid. I advise using the note as part of the owely transaction. The State Bar forms all assume a \$ real estate lien note is part of the owely lien transaction.

Deed of Trust to Secure Assumption (as to existing mortgage): If there is an existing mortgage on the property at the time of the divorce, then presumably one party is ordered to pay that mortgage in the divorce decree. The deed of trust to secure assumption is a standard safeguard to give some protection to the other spouse whose name is still on the mortgage and whose credit rating will be hurt if the mortgage is not paid. The deed of trust to secure assumption gives the other spouse who is not being awarded the house the right to foreclose on the ex-spouse who defaults on the mortgage.

Release of Owely Lien: I think it is best to draft this document at the time of the divorce and give the unsigned copy to our client to hold until the date when the amount due has been paid.

## **15. Real Estate Documents in a Divorce**

A divorce decree may say that the decree “serves as a muniment of title to transfer ownership of all property awarded to either property.” One Texas court of appeals has held that a divorce decree may operate as a muniment of title to transfer title to real estate. *McCarthy v. George*, 623 S.W.2d 772 (Tex. App. – Fort Worth 1981, writ ref’d n.r.e.). However, it is best, indeed required of a careful lawyer, for the divorce decree to order the parties to sign real estate documents that we know will satisfy a title company years in the future. It is also best practice for a mediated settlement agreement to list the deed and other closing documents the parties are to sign.

Real estate documents in a divorce case can include (in addition to the documents related to owely liens described in detail above):

Special Warranty Deed – This is the most commonly used deed in divorces because the grantor only warrants title for the time period he or she owned the property, and so the grantor limits his/her liability for any defects in title that arose before his or her ownership. If a husband and wife own

a house jointly and in the divorce the wife is awarded the house, the husband would be ordered to sign a Special Warranty Deed as grantor naming the wife as grantee.

General Warranty Deed – This is usually not used in a divorce as it includes a promise by the grantor that, in the event of failure of title to the property conveyed, the grantor will pay damages for the grantee’s loss, or will buy the land to make the warranty good.

Deed of Trust to Secure Assumption – If a husband and wife own a home and are both liable for a joint mortgage on the home, a divorce involving an award of the home to the husband would usually require the husband (the spouse getting the property) to sign a deed of trust to secure assumption in favor of the wife. This document basically allows the wife to foreclose on the property if the husband defaults on the joint mortgage. In the above situation, the husband would be the grantor in the deed of trust to secure assumption, the wife would be the grantee and some other person, perhaps wife’s attorney, would be listed as trustee.

Deed Without Warranty – these deeds are usually used in a divorce to “just be 100% sure” that a spouse is the sole owner of a property. Most often, if one spouse owns a property as his separate property, an overly careful lawyer will not be satisfied by the divorce decree declaring the land to be his separate property and also insist on the other spouse signing a deed without warranty, which transfers any possible interest to the land. This sort of deed does make it easier in the future for the title company in some situations.

Quitclaim Deeds – these should not be used in the divorce context, because a person who acquires title with a quitclaim in the deed chain, cannot assert innocent purchaser defenses against adverse title, equity or secret trusts existing when the quitclaim was executed. *Equitable Trust Co. v. Roland*, 721 S.W.,2d 530, 534 (Tex. App. – Corpus Christi 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.). As one author wrote, “A family lawyer does his client a disservice by accepting what might be an instant cloud on his or her title to land.” Rothschild, “Real Estate Transfers – What do These Documents Mean?” 2018 Marriage Dissolution Institute (State Bar of Texas).

## **16. Selling the Residence**

The settlement agreement and divorce decree should anticipate future issues and disputes involving the sale of the family residence. Divorced spouses will disagree over which real estate agent to use, what the list price should be, which repairs are needed and who pays for it, what the terms of final sale are and how the proceeds are divided. An agreement on the sale of a residence must also address who lives in the house, who deals with the realtor, who pays the mortgage and utilities and upkeep (lawn service, pool maintenance, etc.) and how taxes will be paid. A very specific formula for calculating the division of the net proceeds of the sale should be agreed upon. Finally, to avoid going to court with lawyers and possibly having to pay for a receiver, the agreement should include a mechanism for quickly and cheaply deciding the inevitable disputes over the sale.

Here is a form Enos Family Law uses for settlements which addresses almost all of these issues:

**Provisions Dealing with Sale of Residence - Greg Enos Version**

*IT IS FURTHER ORDERED AND DECREED that the property and all improvements located at 4203 Elm Street, League City, Texas 77573 shall be sold under the following terms and conditions:*

1. *The property shall be listed for sale as follows:*

\_\_\_ *The property is already listed for sale with \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ Realty Co.*

\_\_\_ *The parties are ORDERED to list the property for sale with \_\_\_\_\_ of Realty Co. within \_\_\_ days of entry of this order and are ORDERED to sign any listing agreement or other documents needed to list the property for sale.*

\_\_\_ *The parties are ORDERED to list the property for sale with a duly licensed real estate broker having sales experience in the area where the property is located, provided further that the real estate broker shall be an active member in the Multiple Listing Service that includes the area where the property is located. If the parties cannot agree on a realtor to list the property with, then \_\_\_\_\_ [husband or wife's name] shall provide the names of three brokers with the above qualifications to the other party, who shall select the broker to list the property from the list of three names provided.*

2. *The parties are ORDERED to timely sign any required extension of the listing agreement with that broker unless the parties agree in writing to use another broker to list the property.*

3. *Initial List Price:*

\_\_\_ *The property shall be initially listed for sale for \$ \_\_\_\_\_.*

\_\_\_ *The initial list price of the property shall be determined by agreement of the parties. If the parties cannot agree on the initial list price, then the initial list price shall be determined by:*

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ *[list a spouse]*

\_\_\_ *The real estate broker described above shall conduct a market analysis regarding the property and shall make a recommendation for the initial list price, which shall be the list price if either party agrees with the recommendation.*

4. *Sales Price and Terms of Sale:*

\_\_\_ *The property shall be sold for a price and according to terms that are mutually agreeable to the parties. If the parties cannot agree on reductions in list price or the sale price or terms of sale of the property, then:*

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ *[list a party] shall make the final decision.*

\_\_\_ *The real estate broker described above shall make a recommendation on the issue in dispute, which shall be followed if one of the parties agrees with the recommendation.*

\_\_\_ *Disputes over sales price and terms of sale shall be determined by the arbitrator named below.*

\_\_\_ *The property shall be sold for a price and according to terms determined by \_\_\_\_\_ [name the spouse] after consultation with the other party.*



\_\_\_ Any party who paid more than \$ \_\_\_\_\_ for a repair to the property necessary for the property to be sold or lived in pending sale shall be repaid for the amount of any such repair from the net proceeds of the sale of the property.

\_\_\_ Any party who paid for a repair to the property agreed to by the other party in writing in advance shall be repaid for the amount of any such repair from the net proceeds of the sale of the property.

\_\_\_ The remaining balance of the net proceeds of the sale of the property shall be divided Fifty percent (50%) to \_\_\_ and fifty percent (50%) to \_\_\_ [change percentages if needed]

\_\_\_ \_\_\_ shall be appointed arbitrator to determine any dispute over the calculation of the net proceeds of the sale of the property or the division of the net proceeds between the parties. Each party shall pay 50% of the arbitrator's fees.

\_\_\_ The net proceeds of the sale of the property shall be:

\_\_\_ Paid directly to each party by the title company according to the calculations described above.

\_\_\_ Held in trust by \_\_\_\_\_ [name one attorney] pending further written agreement of the parties or court order.

\_\_\_ Deposited into a joint interest-bearing account at \_\_\_\_\_ bank established by the parties. The parties are ORDERED no to make any withdrawals from the account unless they agree in writing in advance or upon further court order.

10. Tax deductions related to the property pending the sale shall be utilized:

\_\_\_ exclusively by \_\_\_\_\_ [name party]

\_\_\_ 50% by each party.

11. Disputes over the Sale

\_\_\_ David Salinsky

\_\_\_ Shari Goldsberry

\_\_\_ Kristina Lucas

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

shall arbitrate via phone any disputes that arise regarding the sale of the property, its upkeep and payments related to the sale, including division of net proceeds. The ruling of the arbitrator shall be binding and each party shall pay 50% of the arbitrator's fees.

## 17. Capital-gains Taxes on Home Sales

Consult an accountant, because tax laws and interpretations may have changed since this article was last updated in 2024!

Taxes on capital gains apply to profits from the sale of stocks and other assets, including real estate. One of the big tax breaks for homeowners is the home-sale exclusion. Single filers get an exemption of up to \$250,000 of net gains on a sale, and married couples filing jointly get up to

\$500,000. To get the home-sale exclusion, a person needs to have owned the home and used it as his or her primary residence for at least 24 months of the five years leading up to the sale. For married couples, only one spouse has to satisfy the ownership requirement, but both spouses must meet the residency test.

If the net gain on the home sale exceeds the full exemption, the excess may be taxed up to 20% if the tax payer owned the home for more than a year. Some high earners might also face a 3.8% surtax. The taxable gain is the difference between the selling price and the adjusted basis—what owners paid for the house, plus any renovations or other capital improvements and certain selling expenses such as real-estate agent commissions.

The exemption thresholds aren't adjusted for inflation and haven't changed since they were set by Congress in 1997. To provide the same tax relief as in 1997 would require an exclusion of \$954,000 in today's dollars for married couples filing jointly.

If the capital gain exceeds the IRS exclusions, it's possible to reduce profits by increasing the home's original purchase price or "basis," by adding certain improvements the home owner has made to the property to "prolong its useful life." For example, a home owner could tack on the cost of home additions, updated systems, landscaping or new appliances. But the cost of repairs and maintenance generally do not count.

Click here for the IRS page on this topic: <https://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc701>

## **18. Out-of-State Real Estate**

The Texas divorce decree cannot pass title to real estate outside of Texas. *Brock v. Brock*, 586 S.W.2d 927, 930 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1979, no writ). The Texas court can, however, order the parties to execute conveyances of the property located in another state. *Id.* A Texas divorce decree may be enforced in the other state under the principle of comity. *McElreath v. McElreath*, 345 S.W.2d 722 (Tex.1961).

The Texas lawyer will usually refer the client to a real estate attorney in the state (or country) where the out-of-state- residence is located. The divorce decree can order the spouse giving up his or her interest in the residence to appear at the offices of that out-of-state attorney to sign specific documents (real estate documents often have different names in other states or nations).