Before you buy the lot.

Twenty questions to answer before the due-diligence window closes

Land here is priced on what people imagine building. Sometimes what you can actually build is smaller, further from the view, or two years further out than the listing implies. Every one of those is knowable before closing.

None of these questions require an architect to ask. They require someone to ask them.

PARCEL

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What you're allowed to build

01 **What is the zoning, and which jurisdiction?**
Town of Jackson and Teton County are different rulebooks, and so are Lincoln County and Teton County, Idaho. A parcel's mailing address doesn't always tell you which one applies.

02 **What is the maximum floor area?**
Not what the neighbors built. What this parcel allows today. Floor area is usually limited by a formula, and how a basement, a garage, and covered outdoor space count toward it varies. That accounting is where people lose a thousand square feet they were counting on.

03 **Is a second dwelling allowed?**
An ADU, guest house, or caretaker unit. Many buyers assume yes. Zoning may allow one and the subdivision's covenants may still prohibit it. Those are two separate approvals, and both have to say yes.

04 **What can the property be used for besides a house?**
Short-term rental, a home office with clients, a barn or shop, animals. If it's part of your plan, confirm it rather than assuming.

Where you're allowed to build

05 **What are the setbacks, and what's left after them?**
Draw them on the survey. The remaining shape is your buildable envelope, and on an irregular or narrow parcel it can be dramatically smaller than the acreage suggests.

06 **Is there a maximum slope for development?**
Steep ground is often off-limits for building, which can push the house to the flattest part of the site. That is not always the part with the view you're paying for.

07 **Is there a limit on how much of the site you can disturb?**
Site development area and landscape surface ratio both cap the total footprint of house, driveway, patios and parking. Long driveways consume this quietly.

08 **Where does the driveway come in, and at what grade?**
Access is a design constraint and a cost. A steep or long approach affects snow removal for the life of the property, and emergency access requirements can dictate width and turnaround.

What the overlays add

Overlays are the layer people miss. They don't appear in a listing, and they can be the single biggest constraint on a parcel.

09 **Is any of it in a natural resource overlay?**
Wildlife habitat, winter range, migration corridors, riparian areas, wetlands. These can restrict where you build, when you build, and what you're required to leave alone.

10 **Is it in a scenic viewshed?**
If so, expect limits on height, exterior materials, reflectivity and colors, and exterior lighting.

11 **What is the wildfire classification?**
Wildland-urban interface designations drive ignition-resistant construction requirements: siding, decking, venting, roofing. This is a budget item, not a paperwork item, and on some parcels it also gates your permit.

12 **Is any of it in a mapped flood zone?**
This affects buildable area, minimum floor elevations, and insurance.

13 **Is it in a bear conflict area?**
If so, plan for storage, fencing and trash requirements that carry real cost.

What it costs to make it buildable

14 **Where does the water come from?**
Public system, shared well, or a well you drill. If it's a well, ask about depth and yield on neighboring parcels, and whether a water right is involved.

15 **Where does the sewage go?**
Public sewer, or a septic system. If septic, ask whether the soils have been tested and where the drainfield can physically go. It competes with the house for the same buildable area.

16 **How far is power, and is it overhead or buried?**
A long service run is a five-figure line item that nobody mentions until after closing.

17 **How high is the groundwater?**
Ask for the seasonal high, not the reading on the day of the test pit. It determines whether you get a basement, what the foundation costs, and occasionally whether you need a permit to dewater the excavation while building.

Who else has a say

18 **What do the covenants actually say?**
CCRs and design review committees can be stricter than zoning on size, materials, colors, roof pitch, outbuildings and timelines. Read them. Don't rely on a summary.

19 **What easements cross the property?**
Utility, access, drainage, conservation. An easement across the middle of the buildable area is a very different parcel than the one in the photographs.

And the one people forget

20 **How long does approval take here?**
From application to permit. If a parcel triggers additional review (environmental, scenic, wildfire, a variance), the timeline stretches, and that cost is real if you're carrying a construction loan or paying rent while you wait.

Three answers that should slow you down

"You can probably get a variance for that."
Probably is doing a great deal of work in that sentence. Price the parcel on what it allows today.

“Everybody around here builds that.”
What neighbors built may predate the current rules. Non-conforming structures are common and rarely repeatable.

“We’ll figure out the septic later.”
Water and sewer determine whether a parcel is buildable at all. It is not a later question.

When you need the answers for one parcel

This list is deliberately general. What it can’t tell you is how these apply to the parcel in front of you. That is what a Feasibility Study answers: zoning and jurisdiction, overlays, setbacks and buildable envelope, maximum floor area, access and utilities, wildfire exposure, and a straight recommendation on whether to build. One written document and a working call.

The Overview takes five business days. A Standard or Complex study takes ten, or five on rush at plus fifty percent.

Overview	Any parcel: the zoning, setbacks, floor area and allowed uses, with a site plan exhibit.	**$1,500**
Standard	One thing in play: a natural or scenic resources overlay, wetlands, a flood zone, or covenants to review.	**$4,000**
Complex	Two or more of those, a lot in a planned unit development or planned resort, or subdivision potential.	**from $6,000**

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