

A national MLS? C.A.R. livestream suggests strong appetite

But also pushback and many obstacles in the way...

BY [ANDREA V. BRAMBILA](#) ★

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What if, instead of 700 or so multiple listing service databases nationwide, there were only one?

It's an idea that's floated in the industry [for years](#), but appears to be taking on new urgency as real estate leaders become increasingly impatient with the inefficiencies that come with maintaining and accessing hundreds of separate databases.



Joel Singer

In a [livestreamed panel](#) hosted by the California Association of Realtors (C.A.R.) Wednesday, C.A.R. CEO Joel Singer asked a dozen industry leaders if "a standards-based national backend" should be the industry's goal "because it's technically possible and also by definition it's the most efficient, isn't it?"

None disagreed with Singer and Mark McLaughlin, CEO of prominent brokerage Pacific Union, was quick to say, "That is the goal. It is in process."

Singer replied, "Well, it's in process in several ways, right? Within the MLS system and outside the MLS system and that's the message for those of us inside organized real estate."

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It's no secret that [off-MLS platforms](#) have proliferated in recent years and [tech startups that eschew the MLS](#) are garnering millions in venture capital.

Broker frustrations with data efficiency and control also led to the creation of [Upstream](#), a broker data platform that was to be the starting point for listing data and would distribute it wherever a broker desired, supplanting a role many MLSs currently play.

writing a check to keep it going," he said.

Pacific Union, which has about 1,800 agents and brokers, participates in 12 different MLSs.

"We are constantly pushing the envelope to find alternatives to the MLS to deliver information to our clients," McLaughlin said. "I think in an industry where the brokerage community owns the data and also, generally speaking, is the revenue stream to the MLSs, that the MLSs have to be far more responsive ... and until that happens we will continue to look for alternatives to the MLS."

For many on the panel, the solution to at least some broker pain points would be the formation of a national MLS database that any number of tools and "front ends" (user interfaces) could plug into. A national database would not necessarily mean a national MLS, according to panelists.



Mark McLaughlin



Craig Cheatham

"We ask our brokers how many MLSs should there be; they don't say one," said Craig Cheatham of brokerage network The Realty Alliance and an Upstream board member. "They don't say 10. They say somewhere between 50 and 250."

Brokers are aware of local differences, and generally, "they love their MLS," Cheatham said.

Singer said he thought a national database "is very long in the future because of the politics."

But David Silver-Westrick of Keller Williams OC Coastal Realty said, "I think to solve this problem we need another moonshot approach to building a national database. There has to be kind of an existential sense that unless we get this done right now, we won't be here five years from now."

Wes Burk, broker-owner of Patterson Realty, agreed. "I don't know if [MLS] consolidation will get us there in time."

Art Carter, CEO of California Regional MLS (CRMLS) which has had a [statewide MLS initiative](#) for years, told panelists that California could have a statewide database in three months if the will was there.

David Charron, chief strategy officer for one-year-old [Bright MLS](#), added, "There are no technical challenges in doing this. It's really human and political factors that stand in the way of greater cooperation and consolidation."



Art Carter



David Charron

But in regards to the broker challenges broker panelists referred to — including access to their own data from MLSs — Charron urged brokers to call out the specific MLSs that don't provide the data rather than generalizing complaints to MLSs in general.

Acknowledging the point, Cheatham credited the 200 MLSs "that are doing a good job," noting that the other 500 MLSs, who are often smaller and have fewer resources and staff, should be brought to the table. He suggested state Realtor associations could bring together various industry players — including the 500 smallest MLSs.

"It can't [just] be the superstars of the MLS world" that participate in conversations about the future of the MLS, Cheatham said.

Carter agreed, citing the old adage: "You can bring a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

"The corollary to that is 'You can salt the oats,'" he said. According to Carter, the way to do that is for MLSs to become more aggressive.

"Consolidate with the willing. Data share with the unwilling to consolidate. And go around those willing to do neither," Carter said.

MLSs wishing to merge should put pressure on their brokers and communicate the benefits of merging to their agents, he said.

Some panelists emphasized that consolidation and a national database won't solve all broker challenges, including the need for uniform data licensing agreements to make it easier for brokers and tech vendors to access data for broker and agent tools.

MLSs also need to not only provide data, panelists said, but offer it in a way that helps agents and brokers show their value to consumers beyond bed and bath counts.

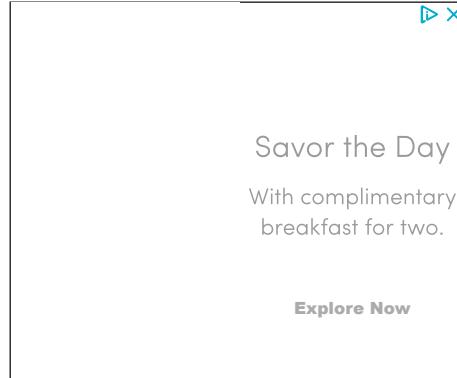
Michael Wurzer, CEO of MLS system vendor FBS, [later opined](#) that a national database would be "anti-competitive, slow-moving, bad technologically, and generally impractical."

C.A.R. will release a report on reinventing the MLS later this month.

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Cory L. Kammerdiener · Broker/Owner at Newhomeprograms.com

I would love to not have to be a member of 6 different MLS just to get the data feed for listings. One should only have to join 1 Association in a state to have access to State Promulgated Forms which is possible in states like Texas and Florida. So we find ourselves joining local associations, not for training or for forms....but insteadfor the MLS. With Clarity and Corelogic being the infrastructure for most MLS's, it would be very easy to roll out a national MLS since they already control the data feeds.

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Andrew Ritchie · Agent at The Broome Team - Re/max At Barnegat Bay

Shocker FBS doesn't want a national MLS that would negatively impact their business.

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Rebecca Brown Jensen · CEO at Midwest Real Estate Data LLC

No concrete plan of action or follow-up? Curious that The MLS Grid was not even mentioned in this article although it was certainly mentioned by me on the panel multiple times. It involves many large MLSs throughout the country that cumulatively represent around 150,000 subscribers. It solves a number of broker pain points that were raised during the discussion and it definitely represents a plan of action. Follow-up conversations are ongoing.

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DaVina Lara

My thought exactly!! It was mentioned "Some panelists emphasized that consolidation and a national database won't solve all broker challenges, including the need for uniform data licensing agreements to make it easier for brokers and tech vendors to access data for broker and agent tools." Why not mention you and the The MLS Grid? amazing!!! You keep preaching it Rebecca!!

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Mark Holt · Captain at Team Realtor- Pan Mass Challenge

UltraMLS. This is technically non plus. Having served on MLS policies committee during the DOJ battle, the only hurdle is modifying the compensation models and sorting through the fact we have a federation of 50 state licensing boards. The EU did it, then again, there's always a spoiler.

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Jim Weix · President at The Real Estate Company, Inc.

"Winter is coming" (pun intended). Beginning this year, the multitude of fiefdom type MLSs, that either use Territorial Jurisdiction to exist, or try to restrain trade by not sharing data with neighboring MLSs, will begin to disappear. Nationwide, we will see a huge improvement in our MLS system in each state, as these MLSs merge or share data. As this happens, we will move closer to either a statewide MLS, or one where all the MLSs in a state share data. At that point, the next logical step would be data sharing between states. The future looks good for MLS and the real estate industry.



I think it is a very bad idea. Centralization reduces resilience. A case in point, BrightMLS. Given the number of problems Bright has had I believe the CEO and CTO should be fired.

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Francisco Garcia
So if the Idea is one MLS then we should be talking about Board Dues, State dues and NAR dues. Why REALTORS are forced to pay so much in dues? You should be able to gain REALTOR status if you pay your State dues and NAR.

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Douglas Curtis · Real Estate Consultant at Keller Williams Heritage

Maybe we should start with statewide MLSs. As soon as we have that figured out, then roll the 50 together or link them. As realtors, we should be able to see active, sold, pending, etc for any area of the country. As a realtor starting business in multiple states this year, this would decrease the backend logistics.

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John Schommer · Real Estate Sales Consultant at Keller Williams Realty

One step at a time! Let's work on having a statewide MLS that brokers/agents can use to 1) help their buyers shop from one database and 2) their sellers can market their homes to buyers agents around the state, versus having all these small "boutique MLSs" claiming their "local territory" that we have to pay big bucks for to join several of them to ensure our clients (buyers and sellers) best interests are served. Florida's MLS-Advantage was a half-hearted way of trying to address this issue, but it falls way short of being a viable solution for our clients needs.

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Pat Veling

Yawn *Sigh*

Been talked about for a very long time. Nothing to see here folks. Move on.

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Stan Sexton

Too many political and economic issues for Upstream to happen. Look for Google, Zillow or Facebook to make the ultimate database..Zillow already buys the MLS feeds. Add FSBOs (Zillow and Facebook do) and you have THE WORLD MLS. Just like the travel and stock brokerage business, sellers and buyers will have direct access to all listings. This will put pressure on the listing agents and eventually FSBOs will list without listing agents.

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Kenneth Jenny

My advice to all the brokers. "When the horse dies, get off." But enough about Upstream. Those outside of our industry are looking in and laughing at our industry because we tolerate the extreme ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of operating 680 different MLS databases. In these times, insane. Why do we do this? Well "we", as in the users of the MLS, really have no choice as the MLS is today an absolute, unchallenged monopoly. Mike Wurzer intended something very different but he actually did a great job in the article above of defining the MLS as we know it today. "anti-competitive, sl... See More

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Deb Roberts · Realtor at Remax Upper Valley Partners

Before we get a nation wide MLS Brokers and MLS Boards should at least try to come together as state wide MLS systems. I am in New Hampshire we have been state wide forever, we went across the line to Vermont now we are 2 full state wide MLS, we are reaching into Maine and MA to invite more boards. CA should start one MLS statewide. I don't see the local MLS give up their power very easily, we will see. Trust in NAR is difficult ever since the Realtor.com mess.

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Lance Brown · REALTOR®; Licensed at Stephen Cooley Real Estate Group at Keller Williams

Blockchains are probably the future in this industry. Both for property listings and property data.

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Mark Bergman

It is often those small and medium sized MLS's that are most resistant to consolidation. Pick any destination resort and you may observe examples of protectionism driven, in part, by greed. I've witnessed this, personally, in several markets and in diverse parts of the country. I am not saying the local agent is not likely to be more knowledgeable than the agent who travels from an adjoining county or nearby metro area, but I have witnessed the local agent's desire to limit cooperation and compensation. Conversely, there is lots of motivation for the buyers agent to travel some distance to try to represent the buyer of a multimillion \$\$ vacation Home even if this agent has never been part of a transaction worth more than \$400K. My guess is that a nationwide MLS will not develop without a court order or DOJ involvement.

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receive a waiver giving them access to any other MLS that their broker is a member. This alone will create changes to the MLS system.

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Bruce Ailion · Associate Broker at RE/MAX Town & Country

From the consumer's standpoint, there is a national MLS, and it's called Zillow. Realtors controlled MLS's have given Zillow our broker data to control, misuse and then sell back to the agent the leads that raw broker data created resulting in a \$5.64 Billion Zillow market cap. If MLSs stopped sending listings to Zillow, there might not be a national consumer's MLS. Why small and medium MLSs would support a for-profit MLS and not a Realtor organization MLS is hard to understand. Realtors are losing the battle as the consumer's first point of contact to the real estate market. A reliable national MLS is needed to regain that position. This does not do away with local MLS management and integrity.

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