

The Oregonian

Real Life: Realtors hold the keys for buyers interested in green-home search

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By **KENDRA HOGUE**
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For those hungry to buy a green-built home this March, there's a new candy store in town: The Regional Multiple Listing Service (RMLS) -- which serves the Portland metro area -- began offering a search Feb. 28 that locates listings certified by Earth Advantage, Energy Star and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

Listings with particular energy-efficient or sustainable features such as high-efficiency gas furnaces, solar heating systems or rain collectors will also be flagged.

However, buyers should be aware that the door to this store isn't open to the general public. Only members of the National Association of Realtors have access to the green-built home search on the RMLS database they pay to join.

The public Web site, www.rmls.com, allows buyers to search by price, home size, schools and other general parameters. But only Realtors can search by narrower targets and richer data -- such as homes in certain architectural styles; with particular features (billiard room, anyone?); or comparable, recently sold homes that help determine how much to offer for a given house.

The good news is, the Portland area has 8,639 Realtor members of RMLS who will gladly unlock the shop for buyers they work for, offering the goodies inside for free.

That's right -- for those of you who haven't purchased a home before, "hiring" a Realtor to help locate a house costs you nothing. Most buyer's agents make their money by receiving a portion of the commission sellers pay their listing brokers when the transaction closes.

"There are currently (about) 10,000 active residential listings in the Portland metro area," said Beth Murphy, RMLS chief executive officer. "Only a Realtor has the tools and knowledge to efficiently narrow this number down and help you find the right home."

If you're not sure where to turn to find a buyer's agent, resources abound.

The Real Estate Buyer's Agent Council of the National Association of Realtors offers the Accredited Buyer Representative (ABR) designation to agents who complete its two-day course. Find members in your community at www.rebac.net.

Certified Residential Specialist (CRS) designees in Oregon can be found at www.oregoncrs.org. To earn the CRS, agents must complete extensive coursework and complete a high number of transactions in a set amount of time. CRS is the highest professional designation a Realtor can earn and fewer than 4 percent of Realtors nationwide have it.

If you're eager to work with a Realtor who's studied up on green building, EcoBroker International has certified 15 brokers so far in the Portland metro area. To find an EcoBroker working in your area, go to www.ecobroker.com.

Another local resource will soon be available: Portland-based Earth Advantage is finalizing plans for its Accredited Professional Broker education program, expected to launch in May. All Realtors are invited to attend the two-day classroom program by e-mailing info@earthadvantage.com or calling 503-968-7160.

For those who doubt that green-built homes are causing much of a stir among builders or potential homebuyers, there are a few studies that may change your mind.

McGraw-Hill Construction's 2006 Residential Green Building SmartMarket Report states:

In 2005, green building comprised approximately 2 percent of the U.S. construction market. McGraw-Hill projects that by 2010, between 5 and 10 percent of new-construction starts (commercial and residential) will be green projects.

Ninety percent of home builders reported participation in green-building activities.

Builders said the most important triggers to increased residential green building include: consumer demand (55 percent); codes and regulations (48 percent); energy cost increases (46 percent); competitive advantage (40 percent); superior performance (38 percent).

That's the builders' perspective. What about their customers?

The Natural Marketing Institute's September 2006 report, "The Latest Trends and Opportunities for Green Homes" divides prospective buyers of green homes into a five-piece pie (higher than 100 percent total is due to rounding):

LOHAS, an acronym for consumers dedicated to "lifestyles of health and sustainability". This buyer is willing to pay 20 percent more for a home that supports their values, according to Duane Woik of Earth Advantage. LOHAS comprise 16 percent of the general population of U.S. adults.

Naturalites, the 25 percent of U.S. adults who are focused on natural and organic consumer packed goods, but not as committed to the environmental movement as LOHAS.

Drifters (23 percent), a group with good intentions that allows others factors such as price and trends to influence them to make choices that are not environmentally friendly.

Conventionals (23 percent), a very practical segment without green attitudes, but with some municipal environmental behaviors such as recycling and energy conservation.

Unconcerned (14 percent), a group that does not view the environment as a priority and shows no environmentally responsible behavior.

Of course, these are national studies and not Portland-centric ones.

If there is a study showing the level of green interest and activity among home builders and buyers in the Portland area, I'd love to see and share it. With Portland at the forefront of the green-building movement, I suspect our numbers would skew higher into the green stratosphere.

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