

You're building a home, and you need help establishing the vital link between yourself, the builder and green products

Enter the EcoBroker



Photo by Lyle Cox

EcoBroker Jeanne Long (right) and her assistant Kip Virgin, both of John L. Scott Real Estate in Bend, work to provide "green" information to both builders and buyers.

by Hilda Beltran-Wagner, for The Bulletin

Ask any home buyer if they like the idea of a well-built house that's environmentally sound and offers low utility bills, and the response will likely be a "yes." After all, who wouldn't want a home that is kind to the wallet, good for the body, comforting to the soul, and gentle to the earth for decades to come?

From the builder's perspective, as well, green design — at the very least, the impression that one is considering it — makes good marketing sense. Just look at the promotional materials. Just look at organizations like 3E-Strategies, a non-profit organization dedicated to sustainability that has attracted over 60 building professionals, as partners since it began two years ago.

But despite obvious consumer demand and increasing evidence that many builders would be happy to meet these demands, the green building industry is still working through an economic catch-22. Often, the things we all fear or simply don't know about, can trump our good intentions. When push comes to shove, most consumers still pay more attention to their concerns about appreciation and resale than they do about health and environment. Developers and builders, though willing and ready, may balk at investing in low-toxic materials if they think buyers will look at a waxed floor and think their bank account will sink into superfund status, And even the most dedicated green builders and green buyers simply may have trouble connecting with each other.

Enter the EcoBroker. An EcoBroker is a real estate agent who is specially-trained to assist home buyers in identifying green and energy-efficient features in a home. To earn EcoBroker designation, an agent completes coursework that covers issues of energy, environment and green business. Their skills and knowledge can assist any consumer, both those who consider themselves "green-minded" and those who do not. By providing the link between builders, consumers, and green products, EcoBrokers are likely to play an increasingly vital role in the evolving industry of sustainable home design.

Forging this path in Central Oregon is realtor Jeanne Long of John L. Scott Real Estate. Since adding the EcoBroker designation to her business card, Long said her phone has been ringing off the hook. She, has been so busy with prospective clients - potential "green buyers" now constituting about a quarter of her business - that she hired an assistant, Kip Virgin, who is also currently in the EcoBroker certification process.

One of this team's most important roles at this point is to connect the right people with the right information. For the majority of their customers, who have varying levels of interest in sustainable practices, Long and Virgin can provide education regarding the known environmental concerns associated with many

Enter the EcoBroker (cont'd)

unconventional materials - the off-gassing of popular wood floor lacquers, for example, or the irritants associated with the ubiquitous formaldehyde pads and synthetic carpeting. On the energy side, they can connect these clients with the benefits of efficient construction, in terms of comfort and long-term financial advantages.

For those buyers who are already thinking in terms of health and sustainability, EcoBrokers can help distinguish between a green-like marketing scheme and a home that's actually been built according to efficient design with sustainable low-toxic materials.

And perhaps most importantly, at least in the short-term, the EcoBroker can help with the even-more-difficult task of finding a green home that also happens to be affordable.

For now, most green houses are custom-built; as such, they are above market, often quite a bit above. High-end designers can hardly breathe for all the work they have.

Some major developments can rightfully say they have taken steps toward greener practices. In Palmer Homes' Stonehaven, for example, sprinklers employ "evapotranspiration" to conserve water. All homes in the 6th phase of Northwest Crossing will have "Earth Advantage" certification (many others already do). Still, the inventory for consumers with modest budgets remains sporadic.

With this in mind, Long views part of her role as inspirational. "I want builders and developers to be inspired," she said. To this end, she developed "The Green Sheet" to help spread the word about green resources, including financing programs, as well as eco-friendly, bank-account-friendly developments that are popping up across the country. She's eager to promote those that are beginning to pop up in Central Oregon, such as

The Shire, which is preparing to break ground in Southeast Bend.

"I want people to take a look at other communities," she said. "There's so much happening right now. It's just not as expensive as people think."

EcoBroker services are clearly a welcome addition to those already committed to building green. Without the access to internal marketing associated with a large-scale projects, a small-scale green builder can have trouble connecting with the green consumer. Paula Kinzer, who has 15 years experience in green construction and serves on the advisory board of 3E-Strategies, discovered this the hard way.

When she and her husband tried to sell, by-owner, the beautiful 2,000-plus square foot home they built, which came complete with solar water, photovoltaics, and a passive solar design, no one in the area was marketing environmental homes.

"I thought I could do it myself," Kinzer said. "But what I was successful at was educating the people who showed up with an interest in green building techniques, because they wanted to do it themselves. I wasn't getting to the ones who were actually in the market for a home."

One sticking point for the serious buyers who did show up with checkbooks in their pockets was the fact that Kinzer's house, while it fit in aesthetically with neighboring ones, was somewhat higher in price. The buyers informed only with the conventional wisdom of conventional home-building, used this as their reference point, rather than the fact that the Kinzer's home was significantly lower in price than green homes that were in different developments.

"I really think that a realtor, especially one with a green specialty, could have helped with those concerns," Kinzer said.