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N.O. real estate agents grow knowledge of green industry

by Emilie Bahr Staff Writer

Considering the changing real estate landscape, one in which some consumers' tastes for sprawling homes built in far-flung subdivisions is waning in favor of a new paradigm built on more energy-efficient houses and communities, it is not surprising, perhaps, that real estate agents are catching on.

As environmentally sensitive building practices, products and assessment tools proliferate in response to consumer interest, some agents are turning to eco-oriented training programs to help them better understand and tap this green marketplace.

Christine Keegan Westenberger has worked as a real estate agent for the past 11 years. Throughout her career in real estate, Westenberger, who works out of ERA Stirling Properties Mandeville office, has noted an interest among clients in the energy efficiency of prospective home purchases.

"They want to have the last 12 electricity bills so they can see about what this house is going to cost them," she said.

Increasingly, though, she notices a rising interest level and savvy among her clients where ecologically-sensitive living is concerned, based on both financial and environmental considerations.

"People want to live greener and try to use renewable resources and try to limit the carbon footprint that we all leave," Westenberger said. Over time, she said, "I think it's just going to become more and more of an issue."

Based upon that conviction, Westenberger recently attended a three-day training program sponsored by the Louisiana Realtors Association and developed by the National Association of Realtors.

The 18-hour program, held in Baton Rouge last month, covered an array of topics such as calculating the costs and benefits of adding energy-saving components to homes, helping clients navigate the array of federal and state tax credits available for making such improvements and how to market homes based on their green credentials. It also touched on the role development patterns play in contributing to or detracting from a residence's eco-friendly standing.

"A lot of the class was talking about urban infill and walkability," Westenberger said. "Way back when, when our grandparents were growing up, they walked to the store. Now, we all drive 45 minutes to get to the mall."

Much like professionals in other industries, real estate agents are able to pursue a variety of continuing education programs, known as designations, throughout the year. These cover a variety of topics and appeal to agents who aim to bolster their credentials in a specific area in order to set themselves apart from the competition, said Amy Phuphanich, LRA's vice president of professional development.

The NAR rolled out its green designation program about a year ago. The move was in response to rising consumer demand for eco-friendly housing and neighborhoods. As of early November, 3,000 Realtors nationally had received the designation. Another 1,000 were expected to complete the program by year's end.

Louisiana's first NAR green designation program, held in March in Lafayette, attracted around 70 people, Phuphanich said. The second garnered around 25 participants. Westenberger is one of five agents with her company to achieve the designation.

A company called EcoBroker, meantime, has made this type of real estate agent training its business since 2002.

"We were around before everything was turning green," said John Stovall, vice president for business development for the Evergreen, Colo.-based company, which offers a \$395, 18-hour green training course for agents.

"We're trying to make our members ... the bridge between this huge amount of very high-quality technical information and technical help that's available and the consumer who doesn't know what to ask for," Stovall said.

Stovall said his company, which offers site-specific and online versions of its program, has trained about 6,000 agents based in all 50 states, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, Australia and New Zealand.

The recent collapse of the U.S. housing market hasn't made selling an optional training course easy, Stovall conceded. Still, he said demand for the program remains strong.

"We still get a lot of inquiries and a lot of online enrollments," he said. "We're continuing to grow."

Stovall is confident that this type of training eventually will be a standard component of the profession.

"It will obviously take a while," he said. "One of the easiest ways I think to say that is just what we hear all the time from the green building professionals and the people at the Department of Energy. We will know we've done our job when nobody talks about green building because that's the only way we do it. ... And really, that is happening."

Phuphanich predicts it may take some time for the trend to catch fire among Louisiana real estate agents the way it has in other parts of the country.

"Louisiana overall is a very conservative state," she said. •

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