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Realtors chart 'green' course

ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATION STRESSES ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Dale Neal
STAFF WRITER
STORY

Realtors chart 'green' course

ASHEVILLE -- "Location, location, location" is the old secret to real estate.

As an Eco-Certified real estate agent, Ginny Lentz wants homebuilders and homebuyers to understand we all share the same location in the environment of the Western North Carolina mountains.

"I'm passionate about preservation," said the Beverly-Hanks agent. "We need to lead the way in raising people's awareness. We have responsibility for the stewardship of the land."

For every house she sells, Lentz tries to make sure another tract of land is preserved from the region's growing problem with sprawl.

That passion makes good business sense for Lentz, one of the first agents to earn the new environmental certification from the Asheville Board of Realtors, the first of its kind in the nation.

"It's the right thing to do to begin with," explained David West, chief executive of the Asheville board. "Given the folks who want to come here because of the environment and the quality of life, this is a good move for our members. We have to address growth in a sustainable fashion and it has to do with these environmental issues."

North Carolina ranks sixth in terms of actual population growth since 2000, gaining 636,751 new residents for a total of 8.7 million. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2004 estimates put the Asheville area population at 387,248, and the city's population is approaching 75,000, up from just under 69,000 in 1999, according to city planners.

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Certification involves changing habits, too

Asheville is leading the way in its awareness of sustainable growth for the homebuilding and homebuying industry. No other realty board nationwide offers an environmental certification program for its members, according to Stephanie Singer, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Realtors.

So far, Lentz, Deb Marshall of Century 21-Mountain Lifestyles, and Mary Love of Keller Williams have completed the 36 hours of study needed for the Eco-Certifications. About 200 agents have taken the initial four-hour course and another 50 realtors have gone through the intensive two-day seminar, working their way toward their green goal.

The certification is not just paperwork. In addition to the seminar, qualifying agents have to have electives from choosing an alternative fuel vehicle to selling a certain number of EnergyStar-certified homes, which cut electric costs through more efficient appliances and heating and cooling systems.

Love drives a Toyota Prius, the hybrid gas-electric car said to get as many as 50 miles per gallon. (Compare that with the average "light duty" SUV or pickup truck, which the EPA in 2005 said peak at 21 miles per gallon.)

Love also composts religiously and lives in a better insulated home.

"I'm the environmental queen in the office," she said.

Love has had her real estate license only a year. Before that, she served as project manager for the Western North Carolina Green Building Council. She welcomed West's idea for environmental certification and quickly went through the program.

"If you want Asheville to remain Asheville, you have to do something," Love said. "There is a fear in Western North Carolina about what is happening to the land. People are concerned about growth and sprawl. I moved here from Long Beach, Calif., to get away from that."

Housing market drives need for green homes

Marshall sees a historic awareness in the area for better living. "People are moving here for the clean air, like the Vanderbilts did" at the turn of the 20th century, she said.

"There's a large part of the market that is driving this. People are coming here and asking for these things in their houses. They want them to be energy efficient. They want agents who know what they are looking for," she said.

Rob Moody, a member of the Western North Carolina Green Building Council, sees a growing market for green homes.

"This is where the market is for this type of construction," he said. "The housing stock has not caught up to the demand for green-built homes."

Moody founded The **EcoBuilders** Inc. in Black Mountain in 2002 to meet that demand. As more green homes are built, it makes sense to Moody to have agents educated to sell them.

Green buildings cover a spectrum of design from radical homes made out of straw bales to traditionally styled homes with green features.

Last year, Moody's house on Cragmont Road was the first in the state certified as a "healthy built" home by the North Carolina HealthyBuilt Homes program.

He uses traditional framing for his houses, but with perhaps 20 percent less wood, along with superior insulation, fresh air ventilation and landscaping to qualify for North Carolina's new Healthy Built Home designation.

Margie Mears, director of the Clean Air Community Trust, helped West and the board put together the curriculum for the first four-hour course.

"We brought together people who might not have sat down at the same table. That's part of what makes Asheville unique. Planning for our own future is what makes this project important."

West envisions the certification program going statewide and across the nation. And he said he believes the market will demand it.

"Given the growing costs of heating, there's a lot that the consumer needs to know. This is not intended to make our members experts in these fields," West said. "They're not going to be doing radon tests or telling you exactly how to grade the slope, but they will be a resource for the consumer."

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WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

GREEN BUILDING: Green or sustainable building is a growing field that develops healthier and more resource-efficient models of construction, renovation, operation, maintenance and demolition. Green homes can use alternative energy sources like solar power, better insulation, landscaping to cut down on water use and safer building materials to improve indoor air quality. Go to

www.wncgbc.org.

ENERGY-STAR HOMES: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers Energy-Star certifications to homeowners or builders who cut energy costs through energy-efficient appliances, heating and cooling systems and lighting. Go to www.energystar.gov.

NORTH CAROLINA HEALTHY BUILT HOMES: In a new program from the Asheville Homebuilders Association and Western North Carolina Green Building Council, the state certifies green-built homes through third-party inspections which grade the house on site, water, energy, indoor air quality, materials and impact on the community. Partners include N.C. Solar Center and the State Energy Office. Go to www.wncgbc.org/healthybuilt/index.php

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