



The Oregonian

GREEN & GRAY: Older adults seek homes easy on them and Earth

Sunday, February 22, 2009

By **CONNIE POTTER**

The Oregonian

For Steve Crow, the epiphany came when he watched Al Gore's movie about global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth."

"I went back to Chicago and traded in my Lexus for a Prius within 48 hours," he said.

Crow, a native Oregonian, has lived in Chicago the past 27 years, heading up an agency that accredits colleges in 19 states. But from the day he left Oregon for graduate school, he intended to return. So when retirement approached and he began plans to build his retirement home in Oregon, he said to himself, "You did the Prius. Why aren't you doing something with green design?"

An Internet search and a few trips to Oregon led him to Jack Wagon of Prairie View Homes. Wagon not only specializes in designing and constructing green homes, but is also a Certified Active Adult Specialist in Housing. It was a perfect fit.

"There was a lot of trust," said Crow. "I felt there was a reputation here I could rely on."

The trust was so great, in fact, that after choosing the lot -- on a bluff overlooking the Willamette River in West Linn -- Crow returned to Oregon only twice to select sinks, toilets and other amenities. He didn't see the finished home until he flew to Oregon in January to move in.

Luckily, it was all he had hoped for.

"I walked through this house, and I was just in awe," said Crow, "absolute awe."

Buyers seek health, wellness

Crow's home is part of Maddax Bluff, a two-home project that Wagon designed as a prototype to gauge market response for green homes targeting active adults. The other house, at 1393 Buck St., is a 2,600-square-foot two-level priced at \$649,900 and will be open to tour on Sunday, Feb. 22, from 1 to 4 p.m.

Wagon had been getting calls from many prospective buyers who said they were thinking about retiring and were interested in going green. So he and his wife, Lana, started researching the market.

"We needed to very much understand the unique nature of these buyers," he said, "how they live, their lifestyle preferences. We've worked really hard to understand the psyche of the buyer and modify our design and build processes to produce a product that really hits home on what their core needs are."

What they learned is that active adult buyers are healthy and cherish their vitality, said Wagon. They are empty nesters, their careers are peaking, and they're thinking about a new lifestyle grounded in health and

wellness.

Booming market

Active adult buyers are a prime market, according to the World Health Organization's 2007 "Age-Friendly Cities Project." The 65-plus population will see dramatic growth over the next 30 years, according to the report. By 2030, 17 percent of the population will be at least 65 years old, compared to 10.5 percent in 2000.

The majority of those people want to stay in their own community, rather than move to retirement communities in sunnier areas, the report said.

That just shows, said Wagnon, that the market is ripe for a 50-plus green project in the Portland area.

"This is a boutique project," he said of Maddax Bluff. "Now we're looking for other areas that might be of interest. The next step would be a much larger community with the same elements.

Location is critical, said Wagnon, and must include the three elements research shows is most important to active adults -- proximity to nature, walking and retail services.

Maddax Bluff fits the bill. In addition to overlooking the Willamette, the project sits at the head of a trail through Burnside Park. It's within walking distance of the new Central Village in West Linn, which features a library, Starbucks, grocery store, restaurants and shops.

"Almost everything I want, I can walk to," said Crow. "I fully intend to be a walker and make the most of my environment."

Aging in place

The wooded setting provides the perfect backdrop for the Prairie Modern design of the homes. Over three-fourths of the landscaping is native plants, making for a nearly no-maintenance landscape.

The interiors of the houses at Maddax Bluff also have several features that make it easy to age in place.

In Crow's house, for example, there's a curb-less shower, which would allow a wheelchair to roll in. Wide halls and doorways also make it easier for someone with ambulatory issues. The framing was reinforced behind core areas in the bathroom in case grab-bars need to be added later. There are no steps at the entry of the home.

Many of these elements don't add to the cost if they are added during construction, Wagnon said. The key, he added, is to try to anticipate some of the changing needs of buyers such as Crow.

"I told Jack this needs to be a house I can live in for the next 25 to 30 years," Crow said.

Built-in savings

Both of the Maddax Bluff houses are certified LEED Gold by the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED for Homes program.

But "going green" doesn't mean buyers have to spend more green, said Wagnon.

"I can produce it at the same price as a conventional home built to code," he said. "It's a myth that green homes today cost more. . . price is not a barrier, it's availability of supply."

In addition, both houses use less energy, water and natural resources and create less waste because of their green features, said Wagnon. Both are plumbed for solar hot water and use a tank-less hot water heater as backup to the solar pre-heat system. The heating and ventilating systems use an energy recovery ventilator that captures the energy of expelled, stale air to preheat incoming fresh air.

Outside, bioswales use vegetation to slow and direct rooftop runoff from impervious surfaces such as driveways and walkways. The use of bioswales will greatly reduce the amount of untreated storm water runoff entering Bolton Creek and the Willamette River via the city storm water system, Wagon said.

Prospective buyers seem to appreciate the combination of green and aging-in-place features, said Wagon.

"They say, 'Finally, someone is putting all the pieces together,' " he said.

Connie Potter is a Portland-based freelance writer. She can be reached at conpotter@comcast.net.

RESOURCE:

Jack Wagon, Prairie View Homes, P.O. Box 699, Lake Oswego; 503-699-5409;
www.PrairieViewHomes.net

©2009 Oregonian