



Michael Klein

How Green Is My Realtor

BY SARA SCHAEFER MUÑOZ

IN A BID to stand out in a sagging housing market, an increasing number of real-estate agents are marketing themselves as eco-friendly—connecting environmentally conscious buyers to “green” homes and helping sellers make their homes more eco-sensitive.

These agents are promoting their knowledge of eco-friendly and energy-efficient properties on their Web sites and blogs. Some are taking courses to learn about things like geo-thermal heat pumps and how

to help home buyers qualify for grants and tax credits for energy-saving improvements.

Yet some housing experts question whether some agents are using a cursory knowledge of green building as a marketing ploy in a tough market. “A Realtor may support [a purchase] regardless of how green the home is,” says Jay Hall, acting director of the eco-friendly homebuilding program at the U.S. Green Building Council in Washington.

Still, there are ways to check a real-estate agent’s earth-friendly credentials. And for
Please turn to page D4



So-called green real-estate agents represent properties such as this **planned solar-powered home** in Geos, a community in Colorado (top) and **eco-friendly apartments** in the Green Armitage building in Chicago. (bottom)

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Continued from page D1

consumers who don't know much about green building or the recent proliferation of green construction labels, these brokers can be helpful, Mr. Hall says.

Many Realtors hope so. Green Key Real Estate in San Francisco asks on its site: "Wouldn't you rather work with a Realtor who shares your values in environmental and social responsibility?" and sends its agents to environmentally friendly building courses. Last fall, Harry Norman Realtors in Atlanta had 48 Realtors certified by EcoBroker International, which educates Realtors on eco-friendly homes and marketing. Meanwhile, individual Realtors are carving "green" niches for themselves: Celeste Karan, of Keller Williams Realty in Chicago, started www.greenhome-chicago.com, a site where she lists properties and promises "to

in indoor air quality, what types of eco-friendly retro-fits will be the most cost-effective, and how to piece together the state and local tax credits or grants for "green" projects. Realtors then earn an EcoBroker designation, something concrete that agents can use as a marketing tool, says EcoBroker chief executive John Beldock.

Kermit Baker, a senior research fellow at Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, says it's a potentially good strategy at a time when there's a glut of homes for sale. "Anything that would make you stand out in this market would help," he says.

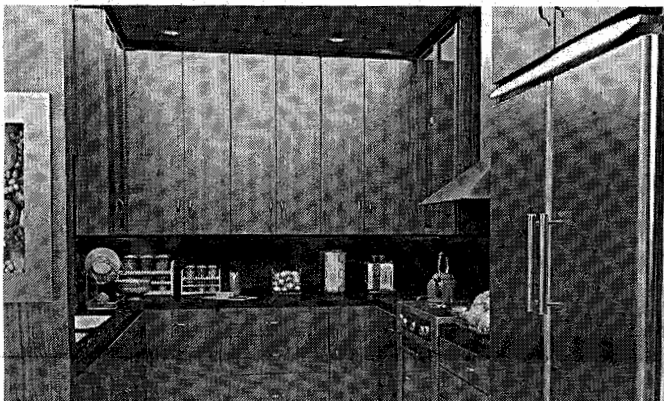
Existing-home sales fell 2.2% in December from November to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.89 million units, according to the National Association of Realtors, a national trade group. The median home price was \$208,400 in December,

cooling system, energy-efficient appliances and a permeable driveway surface (which absorbs the water instead of adding to run-off). With his blog and knowledge of the benefits of "green" building, she figured Mr. Matthews was well-positioned to sell the property.

With a regular agent, "I don't think I would get the niche buyer I am looking for," she says.

The growing number of such real-estate agents come as the building community is in the midst of defining what "green" is. In December, the U.S. Green Building Council—a nonprofit that rates commercial buildings on things like energy use and indoor-air quality—introduced similar rating systems for people's homes. The National Association of Homebuilders, meanwhile, is working with the International Code Council to develop a green building standard. Yet another certification is available through the federal government's Energy Star program, which requires homes to be at least 15% more energy-efficient than those built to the 2004 residential code. States and local building associations, too, may have their own green building programs or guidelines.

Real-estate agents say they will sort through the confusion. Celeste Karan, of Keller Williams Realty in Chicago, asks to see prior utility bills or whether the home is Energy Star rated so she



help home buyers understand what truly constitutes a 'green building.'"

Such agents say their knowledge of environmentally friendly designs and materials can help clients in several ways. First, the brokers will link interested buyers to homes that are built with eco-friendly features, like solar power and energy-efficient appliances. Even if the property is old and lacks such features, agents can walk buyers through possible retro-fits that will lower their energy bills or improve indoor air quality.

When it comes to sellers, agents can advise them on simple projects that can make the home eco-friendly, such as improving insulation or touching up the interior with nontoxic paint in a bid to attract buyers.

EcoBroker International, which offers courses for Realtors, says its program has certified more than 2,600 agents total, doubling the amount since last year. Based in Evergreen, Colo., its classes include things like how to make improvements

down 6% from a year earlier.

Hugh Morris, the community outreach representative for the National Association of Realtors, the national trade group, says pitching environmental certifications isn't the only way Realtors are trying to distinguish themselves these days. A few are marketing themselves as experts in historic properties, while one even says his specialty is homes near nature trails. Yet Mr. Morris says interest in "green" properties has surged; he now answers about five calls a week from Realtors asking how they can get eco-friendly credentials, compared with none a year ago, he says.

When Tonia Lee wanted to sell her one-bedroom live/work townhouse outside Atlanta, she turned to local EcoBroker Carson Matthews after coming across his blog online. The home, which she listed at \$325,000 a few weeks ago, is part of a sustainable-development community and has many eco-friendly features, including a highly efficient heating and

can promote how much actual savings a buyer can expect. She also points out that some homes with quick-fix improvements—so-called greenwashing—may not be as eco-friendly as they sound: Bamboo floors, for example, are often touted as "green" because bamboo is a rapidly renewable material. But most bamboo comes from China, and lots of energy is used in shipping the products halfway around the world.

Another perk EcoBrokers can offer is helping to find buyers energy efficient or eco-friendly mortgages. These are mortgages that offer bigger loans or discounts if buyers make energy-efficient improvements or if their new home meets certain efficiency standards. Last year, **Bank of America Corp.** launched an Energy Credit mortgage, which offers a \$1,000 credit toward closing fees for mortgages on new homes that meet efficiency requirements set by the government's Energy Star program, and **Indigo Financial Group**, based in Lansing, Mich., started selling such mortgages in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Florida in 2005, and recently expanded to Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and Alabama.

Yet some consumers say that when it comes to environmentally friendly homes, it's easy enough to do research on their own. Bruce Ray, a Chicago pastor, is seriously considering a \$400,000 three-bedroom apartment in Green Armitage, a new building made with features like recycled and locally sourced materials, nontoxic paint, and insulation so tight it promises buyers no more than \$600 a year in energy bills for the first two years. He says his belief in stewardship of the environment led him to research the various eco-friendly properties and understand the features they offer. As for the "green" agent who showed him the place, he said she was knowledgeable, but her pitch wasn't what sold him on the property.

"There's so much green information for people now," he says. "I think people who are interested in these buildings are already pretty eco-friendly, already driving a Prius and recycling and composting."

How to exercise your ambition.

See pages B8-B9.

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