

What Green Buyers Need to Know:

The world of Green Building, Green Real Estate and frankly anything associated with the color “Green” has changed dramatically over the last few years.

Just to back up to the beginning of the U.S. environmental movement, the first Earth Day was April 22, 1970. The twenty million demonstrators were organized “virally” without the help of the internet, and the American environmental movement was born. I am grateful to have participated on this historical day in Battery Park, New York City.

Your interest in a Green Home is a direct outcome of the commitment, dedication, education, and hard work of millions over four decades to bring the awareness of environmental stewardship into the mainstream.

2008 was a turning point year when everything “Green” became popular in the national media. The good news is the increased level of acceptance. The not so good news as a Green Buyer, is that prior to this recent transition, the professionals involved in Green Building were dedicated professionals who understood that their efforts would not be rewarded financially in the same way as main stream professionals. Now those who perceive Green Building as popular and lucrative have jumped on the “Green Band Wagon” and not all of them share the “Green Ethic” with the early adopters in this field.

This affects you tremendously. Although there is talk about standards and enforcement throughout all Green product and service categories, there is no third party standard for “Green”. Therefore the word is used by anyone for any reason, not least of which, for profit. Thankfully there are many respected Green Building programs which rate homes in the Austin area. Conversely, many homes are called “Green” when they have not been evaluated by one of these programs.

There are many areas of Building Science that are evaluated by Green Building Programs including Sustainable Sites and Design, Team Approach, Energy and Water Efficiency including Landscaping, Indoor Air Quality, Integrated Pest Management, Durable Materials, Material Efficiency and Construction Waste Management.

Regardless of your own green standards for your home, you will need help understanding the various Green Building programs used in this area when evaluating a Green Home purchase. Not all Green Building programs evaluate or measure the same areas of building science in the same way. All of them do include Energy Efficiency as an important benchmark. But, not all of them require a HERS rating which is a score that is needed if you wish to use an Energy Efficient Mortgage. EEM’s can be a very valuable loan product for you to consider.

Many Green Building programs do not evaluate Indoor Air Quality at all. For those of you, who like myself, have health concerns that require non-toxic Indoor Air Quality, no program I am aware of in this country, offers a high enough standard to protect us. See my page on Indoor Air Quality. www.HillCountryGreenTeam.com/IAQ

Austin is the home of the first Green Building program in the country which evolved in the 80's. This program is the most widely used in our area. One of my favorite things about this program, aside from the professionals in the program, whom I know very well, is that the rating system is founded on climate specific requirements. Green Building is Climate Specific. Austin resides in the Hot Humid Climatic region of our country and the building techniques used up North, for example, simply do not work well, at all, in our climate. Buildings are rated from one through five stars with five stars being the highest standard.

Frequently, over the years, the bar has been raised for the qualifications needed to achieve a particular star level. If you become interested in a home that was rated in the past you will need experienced advice, since, for example, a home rated at five stars ten years ago was built at a standard that would not pass the City of Austin Building Codes for ordinary construction today!

Our Austin Energy Green Building professionals have consulted for numerous programs throughout the country including the United States Green Building Council which offers the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system for commercial, multifamily and residential buildings, as does Austin Energy Green Building.

USGBC also certifies professionals as Accredited Professionals who typically engage in the rating of buildings and LEED Associates who engage in educating others on the Core Concepts and Strategies of the LEED program which provides benchmarks for Green Building in general.

There are few homes rated by the LEED for Homes program, in part, because of the cost in relationship to Austin Energy. If a home resides in the Austin Energy utility district then there is no or low cost for the mentorship, guidance and actual rating of the home except for the cost of the Performance Testing required. Austin Energy has recently expanded its rating services to 25 Central Texas counties. There are fees associated with this expanded service.

The National Association of Home Builders has also launched its Green Building program. This program has earned the distinction of having their standards approved by ANSI (American Standards Institute) but at the same time builders can determine which standards to adopt in their market. Austin Energy Green Building and the Home Building Association of Greater Austin have agreed upon a dual rating whereby a home rated by one program will qualify for the other and thereby receive both ratings. Such cooperation would guarantee a higher standard for NAHB's Green Building Program in our area.

Performance Testing is required by most Green Building programs and is absolutely essential to assure that the home is operating as planned and designed.

If the home is not tested, a buyer will have no idea if the home is performing according to design until the energy bills start coming in.

The popularity of Green Building Programs among reputable builders who do want to verify their superior home construction practices is growing all the time. We have some neighborhoods that require a green built standard and several infill developments that include a cluster of green built rated homes.

My policy is to educate my clients according to their interests and priorities. I maintain the professional standard that it is my responsibility to advise my clients and it is my clients' responsibility to decide what is best for them.