

Aurora Model Home Event Was Uninspiring. Where's the Innovation & Sustainability?

Last Wednesday, I joined 50+ metro area Realtors for a "progressive model home tour" at the Painted Prairie subdivision in Aurora, just south of the Gaylord Rockies resort near DIA. The weather was perfect, and the turnout must have exceeded expectations since the food ran out early at some of the seven model homes on the tour.

Six builders partnered in this event which was sponsored by the two metro area Realtor associations — Denver Metro and South Metro. It was well planned and executed, with registration happening at Honeysuckle Park. All the model homes were within walking distance, but free shuttles ran between them, too.

At registration we were given a map of the homes plus a bag for food. Participating builders were Berkeley Homes, KB Home, David Weekley Homes, Meritage Homes, Remington Homes, and New Home Co.

KB Home had two model homes on the 7-home tour — one for their paired homes and one for single-family homes.

I had my own agenda for the tour. I wanted to know what innovations and sustainability features these builders were incorporating in their 2024 products. I saw very little of either. These were the same stick-built homes with gas forced air furnaces and gas water heaters that I have seen over two decades of showing and selling new homes.

Of these builders, Meritage has the best reputation for sustainability. Our office did a field trip to their Richards Farm subdivision in Arvada many

REAL ESTATE TODAY



By JIM SMITH Realtor®

years ago, and we were impressed at their use of spray foam insulation and conditioned attics. Instead of finding further progress toward sustainability, I found that only the front and back walls of the Painted Prairie homes have spray foam insulation, although they do have conditioned attics.

All the builders are installing high-efficiency gas forced air furnaces (93% to 96% efficient). There wasn't a heat pump system in any of the homes, nor was a heat pump upgrade possible. All the water heaters are gas units, half of them tankless, and a heat pump water heater is not available as an upgrade, despite the huge available tax credits.

Several of the builders were including 220V wiring to the garage for electric vehicles and prewiring or conduits for roof-top solar PV (making them "solar ready"), but both were options, if available at all.

All of the builders said their homes are "Energy Star certified," except for one which claims to qualify for that certification but didn't want to pay the EPA's fee for it.

Last week I wrote about the new "Energy Star NextGen" certification, which requires all-electric design, not just Energy Star appliances. None of these builders even aspire to that certification. For that, you need to look at Thrive Home Builders, which is building all-electric homes in Broomfield, Loretto Heights and Lone Tree. See my article at right.

Thrive homes are also EPA Indoor airPLUS qualified, something not even mentioned by any of the Painted Prairie builders.

All the builders promoted the fact that they will continue paying a co-op commission — typically 3% on the base price at closing — to agents who bring them a buyer. Given the turmoil



in the real estate industry regarding buyer agent compensation, buyers can only be assured their agent will be compensated by the seller if that seller is a builder. Competition with fellow builders means they dare not

eliminate buyer agent commissions.

Sustainability aside, there was one builder at Painted Prairie that I liked, a company I had never heard of before — **New Home Co.** What impressed me was their lack of upgrade fees. You can choose different styles of cabinets and countertops, but you don't pay extra for any of them. Also, they had some innovative electrical components, and they include a video doorbell. They also give buyers \$30,000 to use for buying down the mortgage interest rate to 3.5% the first year, 4.5% the second year and 5.5% for the rest of a 30-year mortgage.

Where's the Innovation & Sustainability? Look Here...

Following my disappointment in Aurora, I decided to visit Thrive Home Builders' Loretto Heights development, where the kind of innovation and sustainability I was looking for is on full display.

I met with Stephanie Nobbs, who heads the sales office. The Loretto Heights project is all-electric—no natural gas service.

The heating systems are ducted heat pump systems. You can tell a heat pump by how it's mounted on the building (right). Inside is an "air handler," since the outside unit produces all the heat in the winter and cooling in the summer. Ducts carry the hot or cold air to each room, as in a conventional home. (It's also much quieter.)

The homes are super-insulated, using blown-in insulation not only in the attic but in the exterior walls. Because they are airtight, each home has a Panasonic Whisper-Fresh unit mounted above the air handler (at left) to bring in fresh air, in communication with a Whisper-Green exhaust fan in the bathroom.

The device helps the Thrive homes win the EPA's Indoor airPlus certification in addition to the agency's Energy Star NextGen certification that I wrote about in last week's column.

Hot water is created by the same Rheem heat pump water heater (at right) that I installed in my own home two years ago.

Heat pumps aren't new technology, yet Thrive is the only home builder to make them standard, let alone available as an option, for both space heating and water heating. Research has shown that, although homes built like Thrive's are more expensive to build, they save as much as \$3,000 per year in utility costs for the homeowner.

The Loretto Heights model home where I met Stephanie is two stories plus a finished basement, which has a base price of \$569,900. It doesn't have enough roof space to make the home "net zero" with solar panels, but the panels that do fit on the roof generate 70% of the home's electrical needs. And this subdivision is in Denver, which has the lowest property taxes in the metro area. There is a Metropolitan Tax District, which adds 65 mills to Denver's 79.5 mill levy.

Thrive will be building single-family homes in Loretto Heights, but at this point only townhomes are ready to occupy, and several are. If I were in the market for a new home, I would definitely consider a Thrive "next generation" home over the kinds of homes I toured in Aurora. Call me if you would like to tour one of Thrive's model homes.



Price Reduction in Lakewood

Jim Swanson's condo listing at **5725 W. Atlantic Pl. #101** is now priced at only \$290,000. Video tour at www.LakewoodCondo.online.

Just Listed: 4-Bedroom Arvada Home

You'll love this move-in ready two-story home at **7885 Quail Street** in the Oak Park section of Arvada. It is just two blocks from Alice Sweet Thomas Park to the west and Sierra Park to the east. The sellers have taken excellent care of this house since buying it 34 years ago. It has four bedrooms and 2½ baths and 2,021 main square feet plus an unfinished basement. The corner lot is just under a half acre and is beautifully landscaped. Built in 1978 of brick with wood framing, it has central A/C and gas forced air heating, plus a wood-burning fireplace. All appliances in the kitchen are included, as are the new washer and dryer. Find magazine-quality photos, floor plans, and a video tour at www.ArvidaHome.info, then call me at **303-525-1851** to request a private showing. I will be holding it open this **Sunday, May 26, from 11am to 1pm.**



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"Concentrate on giving, and the getting will take care of itself." —Anonymous