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For 'Green,' Buyer Beware

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Sharon Simms, a St. Petersburg Realtor with a specialty in selling environmentally friendly homes, has learned to be careful about what she says when she goes to work.

"The term 'green' is often used very loosely," Simms said. "So many of these things have not been explained enough. It's not that the seller is hiding something. It's just that you didn't ask."

As home building slumps and environmentalism becomes a business advantage, a fast-growing market for green homes is becoming synonymous with "buyer beware."

Building green means incorporating environmental features over and above mandated code standards, which also means it is a field that exists largely outside official regulation. Industry practitioners say there's no legal definition of what a "green" building is, and there are dozens of industry standards that can vary across different regions in the country.

Agencies like the Florida Green Building Coalition -- a nonprofit partnership of builders, consultants and academics founded in 2000 -- set key statewide standards. Its green home designation covers conditions across eight categories, including well-known green features like energy and water efficiency, but also lesser known aspects like site, lot choice and disaster mitigation.

Here's where things start getting murky.

"Builders out there may be doing three or four 'green' items, but they call themselves a green builder but they have no documentation," said Drew Smith, president of Two Trails, a green certification firm. "Three or four things do not make a house green. The media needs to put it out there about 'buyer beware.' If there's no third-party certification, then the house isn't green, and the builder isn't really building green."

In the green home designation the coalition offers, builders can choose any way they want to score at least 100 points on the checklist out of the 300 maximum, so a buyer may never know -- unless they ask -- why a home is "green."

It's a small but swiftly growing market.

Statewide, the Florida Green Building Coalition lists only 1,227 homes that have its certification. But in coming years, thousands more will be built across the Tampa Bay area alone, in an industry that is expected to double in value nationwide to reach \$38-billion by 2010, according to McGraw-Hill Construction.

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