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Larry Avila column: Green buildings highlight of Parade of Homes & Condos tour of the Valley Home Builders Association

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Just by looking at the numbers, it's hard to imagine the Fox Valley **home building** industry still is feeling the effects of the recession.

The 2010 Parade of Homes & Condos, presented by the Appleton-based Valley Home Builders Association, kicks off Saturday. It continues into Sunday, then resumes Aug. 18-22.

Additional information

These links will open in a new window:

- ◆ [Special Parade of Homes section](#)
- ◆ [The P-C's Watchdog special section](#)
- ◆ [Sign up for news, weather and sports text alerts.](#)

The tour features 48 new houses and condominiums, which is about a typical number featured on the summer tour. Christine Shaefer, VHBA executive vice president, said about half of the tour homes have been sold.

The tour typically draws between 5,000 and 6,000 people, Shaefer said. Visitors will see a wide range of homes, between 1,200 and 6,200 square feet.

A unique feature of this summer's tour is the Wisconsin Trend Home, built on behalf of the Madison-based Wisconsin Builders Foundation.



Trend Home General Contractor Ed Schmidt (left), with Schmidt Bros. Inc. Custom Homes of Appleton, talks to potential buyers about some of the project's green features during a recent open house. (Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Builders Foundation)

It mostly was made possible through donations by more than 35 vendors, who gave either time, materials or both toward the project, which showcases the latest in energy efficiency, indoor environmental quality and other green building standards.

Ed Schmidt with Schmidt Bros. Custom Homes Inc. of Appleton coordinated the trend home project. Construction on the home began at the end of April and was finished in time to be featured on the tour.

"It was a good opportunity for us," he said. "We knew we could make it happen."

Shaefer said before the [printing](#) of the tour's special section, which is available on www.postrescent.com by clicking on my column, the trend home had not been purchased. It recently sold, she said Monday. Proceeds from the sale benefit the home builder's foundation.

Schmidt said the 2,600-square-foot trend home's projected annual utility costs will be \$1,500, which is about half that of a home of similar size built under normal standards. The trend home's utility usage, once occupied, can be monitored at www.witrendhome.org.

"I think all the green features of this home really are what makes it stand out," he said.

The construction and [real estate](#) industries still are climbing out of one of the worst recessions in recent history, but there is more optimism today than a year ago.

"Overall, I think there is a feeling of adjustment from last year," Shaefer said. "No one had seen a building climate like last year in more than a decade, now everyone is just getting used to the new normal."

The new normal is scaling back from building large homes and taking more work from customers interested in remodeling existing homes, Shaefer said.

Schmidt said 2010 is going better than last year, though he too is getting used to a different pace.

"The market isn't like it was four years ago," he said. "It's still tough when you have to compete with the foreclosures and other existing homes on the market."

Schmidt said inquiries about new homes are more frequent than last year.

"That's the one advantage we have," he said of [new home construction](#). "Some buyers are finding they can't find exactly what they want (on the market) and decide to move ahead on building a new home where they can customize it how they want."

Shaefer said builders are reporting customers having challenges **securing** financing. The glut of mortgage foreclosures has led to stricter lending standards.

"Lenders really want a good-sized down payment from borrowers today and they want to be certain that the borrower is **comfortable** and able to handle the payments for their loan," she said. Despite a tougher lending climate, builders and the real estate market have some bright spots.

The national average **interest rate** for a 30-year fixed mortgage was 4.56 percent Monday, Bankrate.com reported.

The National Association of Home Builders reported in July that sales of newly built homes nationwide rose 23.6 percent in June to a seasonally adjusted rate of 330,000 units. The Midwest was among the regions of the country to see sales gains, reporting a 20.5 percent increase in June from the same time last year.

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