

Home Builders to Gather in Orlando Under Under cloud of Housing Slowdown

BYLINE: LINDA RAWLS, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

DATE: February 5, 2007

PUBLICATION: Palm Beach Post, The (FL)

EDITION: FINAL

SECTION: INSIDE LOCAL BUSINESS

PAGE: 1F

With a once-robust housing market in a monthslong decline, hundreds of local housing-industry professionals will attend the 63rd International Builders Show Wednesday through Saturday at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando.

The show, the largest trade show in the world, attracts builders, architects, contractors, designers, manufacturers and other professionals involved in every aspect of residential and light-commercial construction. Last year's show drew a record 105,000 industry representatives from 95 countries, according to the National Association of Home Builders, which expects at least that many to attend in this year's difficult housing market.

"It's an opportunity to see what manufacturers are offering to put in a house to improve livability," said Joshua Fowler, executive vice president of the Palm Beach County Gold Coast Builders Association.

As of last week, 508 members of the Gold Coast builders group had signed up to make their way to the Land of Disney, Fowler said.

Important trends for local builders, Fowler said, include senior housing and "green building." "But most of the show is dealing with new things to put in a house and better ways to build," he said.

The Big Show, the theme for his year's event, is certainly the place to be to see the latest trends in technology and home building.

A record 1,800 exhibitors, including 570 first-time companies, will display their wares throughout more than 1 million square feet of exhibit space in both halls of the giant convention center. Many manufacturers pick the builders show to introduce new products, and some even become successful -- such as last year's PEARL, or "Permanent Escape and Rescue Ladder."

Three of the nation's top 10 home builders are installing the ladder on the second story of their new homes to provide a fast escape in case of fire or other emergency.

The show, which is not open to the public, also features nearly 300 educational seminars and hands-on workshops on everything from "Understanding Housing Markets and Consumers" to "Designing for the Active Adult."

A new educational track this year, "Changing Markets," will offer tips on how to navigate the housing slowdown, plus forecasts for the home-building and remodeling industries and a seminar on construction cost cutting.

These and other seminars should be well attended, given the shaky condition of the new-home market.

New home sales fell last year by the largest amount in 16 years, according the Department of Commerce. Meanwhile, major home builders like Lennar Corp., D.R. Horton and Pulte Homes have been revising their 2007 sales forecasts downward as new-home buyers have slowed their pace.

Home sales did increase for the second straight month in December, raising hopes that the worst of the housing downturn is ending.

The Department of Commerce reported that December sales rose 5 percent, following a 7 percent rise in November.

Those two increases, however, were not enough to salvage the entire 2006, with total sales of 1.1 million units, down 17 percent from 2005.

That marked the biggest decline since an 18 percent plunge in the housing downturn of 1990. The housing slowdown is occurring after a boom in which sales of both new and existing homes set records for five consecutive years.

The lowest mortgage rates in four decades powered a surge in sales that was bolstered by investors making purchases in hopes of turning around and reselling the properties for quick profits.

Analysts attributed the big declines in 2006 to a cooling of that speculative boom. Moreover, the housing slowdown trimmed 1.2 percentage points off overall economic growth in the July-September quarter.

Analysts are looking for an equally severe hit in the final three months of 2006, which haven't been revised, with housing expected to be a continuing drag in the first half of this year. Despite the slowdown, home building is still going on, of course.

The New American Home, the official showcase house for the builders show, is being built on an infill site in Orlando as a "real-world laboratory" to showcase the latest building techniques and materials.

The three-story, contemporary house has a concrete wall system. The show house is a staple of the event.

But new this year, the show also will feature The **Renewed American Home**, a tiny 1909 working-man's cottage that was remodeled to twice its original size.

Scores of breakfasts, luncheons, dinners, buffets, receptions, cocktail parties, dances, fashion shows and other social and entertainment events pepper the schedule.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.
linda_rawls@pbpost.com