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Home Front: Capital-area home builders see bright spot in solar power

By Jim Wasserman - Bee Staff Writer

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With California aiming to be a global superpower in sun-powered housing, its capital region is embracing that solar goal in a big way.

Only a year ago about 1,600 houses statewide had preinstalled solar systems. The Sacramento area alone now has more than 3,000 such homes under construction or planned.

Area home builders are seeing better sales with solar-power systems as standard features. Many say it's a way to distinguish their product in a tough market with more supply than demand for new houses.

Most recently, Granite Bay-based SolarProInternational announced a \$4.2 million purchase of solar tiles for 378 new homes rising in Placer County. The firm says it has agreements with three builders there -- Dallas-based Centex Homes and JTS Communities and Reynen and Bardis Communities of Sacramento.

SolarPro President Kevin Boedecker says the tiles are manufactured in Grass Valley by Open Energy Corp., based in Solana Beach in San Diego County.

Boedecker's announcement comes as Rocklin also gains a piece of solar history. The city's Whitney Ranch is home to the first project approved by California's New Solar Homes Partnership Program. That's a 10-year, \$400 million program run by the California Energy Commission to subsidize solar in new-home construction.

The state is spending nearly \$3 billion more to push solar systems onto existing houses.

The 60-home Rocklin project is called Wisteria. Home sizes range from 3,800 to 4,400 square feet, and prices are in the \$600,000 and \$700,000 range. The builder is Santa Rosa-based Christopherson Homes.

Local home designers say financial incentives are finally pushing a notion associated with the counterculture into mainstream suburban life. SMUD and Roseville Electric, too, are providing millions of dollars in financial incentives to home builders to make solar power a standard feature.

Hot deals in town

People are notoriously fickle when looking at houses. Experts say the majority decide within seconds whether they like a house or not.

When it's hot, like this time of year, they can be impossible. Riding through a hot afternoon in a real estate agent's air-conditioned car, they'll simply judge a house through the car windows and yelp, "Don't bother."

Yet ... what if there's ice cream inside the house? Or cold bottled water, sodas and iced tea in a tub filled with ice? What if the air conditioner is really cranked up, revealing a huge difference between out there and in here?

"They tend to hang around a moment," says Lisa Morris, a Roseville real estate agent and home stager.

Cooling your customers, indeed, is the tactic most recommended -- after fresh cookies on the stove.

Sacramento-based agent Patrick Lieu is a big fan of backyard water misters as a sales tool. Triple-paned windows are also a great boast if you have them.

We liked this advice, too, from the blog of agent Tara Schinsing in New York state (where it's hot *and* humid):

- Set up a retreat where people can enjoy a cold drink and rest. If they'll sit, they'll chat a while.
- Rent an ice cream cart. Nobody can resist ice cream.
- Give away inexpensive mini-fans. People use them while looking. Attach your business cards.

Of course, if none of this works you can always tell them the truth about Sacramento: It's a dry heat.

Changing of the guard

Behind the new-home sales numbers released today by Folsom-based Gregory Group is another story: Location and other factors have considerably reshuffled this year's home-builder market share.

Last year's top-ranked Sacramento-area builder -- D.R. Horton, with 1,162 sales and 12 percent market share -- has fallen to sixth place with a 5 percent share, the Gregory Group reports. Texas-based Horton said this week it has struggled in many California markets with a 53 percent drop in orders statewide.

This year's leading regional builder, with 431 sales and 10 percent market share, is Los Angeles-based KB Home. Though it builds houses regionwide, much of its activity is in Natomas and Roseville. Both, being near job centers, have experienced smaller sales downswings than other areas. The Los Angeles builder is on pace to exceed its 802 sales last year.

Others in the region's top five: Dallas-based Centex Homes, Miami-based Lennar Corp., Michigan-based Pulte Homes and Beazer Homes of Atlanta.

All those memories on sale

Every day older people are selling homes where they have lived 45 years or more and raised a family. With a lifetime inside those walls and all those memories, it's not easy for parents or their children. We'd like to hear from people for an upcoming story about this letting-go process. Contact us at the e-mail address or telephone number below.

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