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Survey: Boomers Want Single Level, Energy-Efficient Homes in the Suburbs

► Source: [BuildingOnline's eUpdate](#)
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WASHINGTON -- A new survey reveals that 55+ Americans would prefer suburban living in single-story homes with amenities, particularly high-speed Internet access, for their later years, and they don't consider "universal" design a priority. These are some of the findings from 55+ Housing: Builders, Buyers, and Beyond, a survey conducted by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and the MetLife Mature Market Institute, which asked owners and renters about their current homes and the types of homes, communities and features they prefer as they age.

The survey also questioned builders about specific features provided in new homes and how much customers are willing to pay for them, which revealed interesting contrasts. While builders seem to be providing more universal design features (lever-handle/door knobs, wider doors and hallways, a full bath at the entry level), consumer preferences don't reflect an equal appreciation of such items. Consumers indicate they want amenities such as non-slip floors, larger medicine cabinets, lower kitchen cabinets and emergency call buttons, but those features are not as widely included in new homes.

On other issues, builders and consumers are closer to agreement. Consumers clearly want to be close to community resources like shopping and medical services; builders and developers have responded by placing communities accordingly. Builders are providing more energy-efficient and environmentally sensitive features. While many consumers note that they are conceptually supportive of these efforts, fewer indicate a willingness to pay significantly more for "green" homes.

"The data suggests that builders will have to be more tuned in to consumer needs, but potential buyers may be somewhat shortsighted as well," said Sandra Timmermann, Ed.D., director of the MetLife Mature Market Institute. "The homes consumers say they want may present difficulties for the long term as they age in place. They prefer the suburbs and the country, but these areas generally lack public transportation. Universal design is not a strong preference, but they'll need greater accessibility later on. Aside from recognizing that one-story homes will be best for their later years, customers may be somewhat unrealistic."

NAHB Chief Economist David Crowe pointed out that as the housing market returns to health, builders will need to be increasingly responsive to changes in the market for 55+ housing. "These surveys were conducted as consumers were watching their savings shrink and as builders were seeing sales grind to a halt," said Crowe. "So this study reflects the very latest in the changing perceptions of what is most important in housing for this age cohort."

Other survey findings included the following:

--One-third of consumer respondents would choose a close-in suburb and nearly another third prefer an outlying suburb. About one-quarter would choose a rural community and 9% prefer a center-city setting. Single-story homes are a clear first choice among respondents (79%) over two-story (15%) or split-levels (6%).

--While conventional wisdom dictates that older buyers would be looking to downsize, most consumers say they'd like their next home to be the same size as their current one.

--The five features rated most important by consumers were: in-home washers and dryers, storage space, windows

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that open easily, main level master bedrooms and easy-to-use climate controls.

--Eighty-three percent of consumer respondents rated high-speed Internet as somewhat to very important.

--While consumers expressed a preference for maintenance-free lifestyles, with services such as interior and exterior home repair, transportation, housecleaning, etc., few builders offer such services, which depart from their primary business of construction.

--Twenty-seven percent of potential buyers say they are not concerned about the impact of home building on the environment. Another 23% are concerned, but say that will not be a consideration when they make a purchase, and 37% of consumers responded that want an "environment-friendly" home, but would not pay extra for it. Only 12% said they would be willing to pay more.

--Ninety-four percent of builders report that their buyers want more energy-efficient new homes; 55% said buyers specifically want EnergyStar(R)-rated homes. Twenty-five percent of builders said buyers want homes with more recycled materials and less materials overall. Most builders (69%) indicated that some of their buyers are willing to pay extra for green amenities; 9% indicated that most were. The remaining 22% said none of their buyers were willing to pay extra for green amenities.

The research in 55+ Housing: Builders, Buyers, and Beyond is from the second part of a series, the first part of which was released in April. That first segment, Housing for the 55+ Market: Trends and Insights on Boomers and Beyond, included an in-depth profile of the 55+ market based on figures from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Housing Survey from 2001 through 2007. The full research and accompanying data chart books are available at www.MatureMarketInstitute.com