

Levels of accessibility gain importance as boomer population grows

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By **Special to The Oregonian**



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The single-story home on Lovrien Avenue has just one step to enter the house, listed with Lyn Stevens of RE/MAX Equity Group for \$307,500.

By JOHN KIRKLAND
SPECIAL WRITER

Would you know an accessible home if you saw one?

In the real estate world, accessibility is all about being able to get in the front door, move around with ease, and especially use the bathroom — all without obstacles.

You don't have to be wheelchair-bound for these things to matter. Baby boomers who want to stay in their homes well into old age, or those who are moving an elderly parent, are particularly keyed in to home features that make living easier: minimal steps leading to the front door; a master bedroom on the main floor

(or better yet, a single-level home); lever door handles rather than knobs; wide doorways and halls; and showers that have little or no curb.

The young and spry may not notice these things when they're shopping for a home. But these features suddenly gain importance when the need arises — whether it be from normal aging, injury or illness.

One example of an easy-access home currently for sale is at 3144 S.E. Lovrien Ave. in Gresham, listed with Lyn Stevens of RE/MAX Equity Group for \$307,500. The things that make it accessible are subtle: single story, one short step to get in the front door, garage on the main level, wide doorways and a walk-in shower. It's suitable for someone with normal aging issues or with minor disabilities. For someone with more severe challenges, it could be retrofitted with a wheelchair ramp and lever door handles.

Across town at 460 N.W. 97th Ave. in Portland is another single-story home, this one with a wheelchair ramp and a roll-in (as opposed to a walk-in) shower. It's listed with Phil Barr of Prudential Northwest Properties in a value range of \$239,000 to \$299,000. An open house will be held Sunday, April 17, from noon to 3 p.m.

Bridging the gap

Both homes are listed on Homebridge.org, a searchable database for accessible homes, which was started by Cathie Ross, an Oregon City mortgage broker who also founded Mobility Rules, an education and training organization for individuals — including real estate professionals — to learn about home accessibility.

Realtors can earn a Certified Mobility Consultant designation by going through the Mobility Rules program, and Realtors can have their listings featured on Homebridge if they mention certain accessible features when they list their home for sale. Homebridge gathers data from Regional Multiple Listing Service (RMLS) postings, and automatically picks out the ones with accessible features.

The only problem is, it doesn't have many listings. Ross says that's because many Realtors don't know that they should mention accessible features on the RMLS form.

"If you're putting your home on the market and you have accessible features, ask your Realtor to check the right RMLS boxes. It's in the interest of the public, and you'll be able to sell to a wider range of people," she said.



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A buyer who doesn't use a wheelchair but has mobility issues would appreciate the low floor ledge and a place to sit in the shower of a home at 3144 S.E. Lovrien Ave. in Gresham.



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A home for sale at 460 N.W. 97th Ave. has a ramp and a roll-in shower.

The demand for homes with accessible features is growing, Ross said. That demand is not only for new homes, but also for home remodeling jobs that can help owners stay in their homes without assistance.

The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) recently surveyed its remodeler members and found that more than two-thirds of them were actively doing some kind of work to help their clients live in their homes longer — a concept known as “aging in place.” Such work has risen in demand over the last five years.

The highest percentage of accessible remodeling work is in the bathroom. Grab bars, higher toilets and curbless showers top the list. Other

items include building a master bedroom on the main floor, adding task lighting, and even installing easy-to-read thermostats.

Nor surprisingly, most of that work is being done for homeowners older than 55 — and mostly for acute age-related disabilities. But the survey showed that even some far-thinking homeowners in their 30s are remodeling to keep their homes accessible, even if the need is far off in the future.

The NAHB is also projecting that new homes built in the next five years will have an increase in accessible features — wider doorways and hallways, and non-slip floor surfaces, for example. Also, more new homes (although still in the minority) will be one-story.

Kathy Jo Larson, a Beaverton Realtor who got her Certified Mobility Consultant designation from Mobility Rules, is seeing an increasing demand for one-story homes among aging baby boomers, but admits they’re hard to find because lot sizes in the Portland metro area are too small to accommodate them.

“I think builders should install elevators as a feature in all two-story homes — or at least some in each neighborhood,” she said.

Having no stairs to climb is important to aging home buyers. Larson recently helped an older client find a one-story home in King City.

“It gave her peace of mind to know she wouldn’t have to move again because of accessibility reasons,” she said.



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A ramp leads to the front door of the home for sale at 460 N.W. 97th Ave.



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The large kitchen in the home on Lovrien Avenue is easy to maneuver around in.

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