

Pandemic Brings Changes In What People Want In Housing

REAL ESTATE: Survey Shows Being Safe From Disease is Now a Top Priority

■ By RAY HUARD

Three San Diego women who are executives in companies that deal in commercial real estate commissioned a national study to find out how people's feelings about their homes have changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We've been seeing some of the speculation from some of our homebuilders we work with about what people might want," said Nancy Keenan, president and CEO of DAHLIN Group, an architectural and planning firm with offices in San Diego.

"No one was talking about asking how people were thinking about living in their homes full-time," said Teri Slavik-Tsuyuki, president of tsk ink, LLC, an Encinitas marketing firm that works with developers and builders among others.

Wanted to Understand

While people were stuck in their homes until recently, "the information shared by analysts was largely opinion," Slavik-Tsuyuki said. "We grew kind of frustrated about that. We really wanted to understand directly from consumers."

Keenan and Slavik-Tsuyuki joined Belinda Sward, founder and chief strategist of Strategic Solutions Alliance, a Carmel Valley real estate consulting firm, in commissioning the study.

Conducted between April 23 and April 30, the survey by Gazelle Global Research based in New York questioned 3,001 adults between the ages of 25 to 74 with an annual household income of \$50,000 or more.

What it found dramatically illustrated how the pandemic has changed people's attitudes toward where they live, and Keenan said the results are already affecting her work.

Safety First

An overwhelming majority of those responding – 91 percent – said safety was their top priority in picking a place to live – not safety from intruders but safety from disease.

Even the significant upswing in the number of renters who want to buy was affected by their concern for safety.

"They don't feel that they have control over the cleanliness and the safety in a rental home," Sward said.

For architects and builders, that means incorporating things like germ resistant flooring and countertops, having separate entrances for family, guests and deliveries and "mud rooms" near entrances where people could shed dirty clothing with a bathroom nearby for cleanup.

"We actually saw that people wanted to groom and clean themselves when they come in. We have one builder who's actually looking at that," Keenan said. "That kind of response is already beginning to happen."

More than half – 55 percent – said they'd

be willing to pay more for germ-resistant features and 55 percent said they'd pay more for greater technology and energy efficiency while 51 percent said they'd pay more for increased storage for food and water.

By technology, they mean things like touchless entries, appliances, faucets and toilets.

Keenan said that her firm is taking a closer look at using germ resistant materials commonly used in medical and school settings.

"We haven't necessarily looked at that in residential settings, but we could," Keenan

said. "What we want to do is definitely spend some time on the more innovative materials and find out what materials price themselves appropriately for the residential market."

Buying Over Renting

Nearly half of renters surveyed said the pandemic has made them more inclined to buy a home, although housing costs is a challenge in markets like San Diego.

Among all those surveyed – renters and homeowners – 72 percent said that their preference was a single-family home.

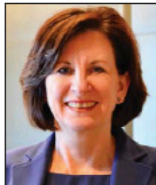
People in the West were more likely to say they could settle for a townhome or condo, Sward said.

A growing trend that's likely to accelerate post pandemic is for developers to build single-family homes as rentals, Sward said.

The strong desire to own a home post pandemic was particularly noticeable among younger renters, Sward said, with nearly two-thirds of those between 25 and 45 saying they want to buy a home.

"A lot of builders in San Diego are having

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Nancy Keenan



Teri Slavik-Tsuyuki



Belinda Sward

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a lot of inquiries from renters looking to buy and they want to buy now," Sward said. "If I were a builder, the biggest market I would look at is millennial young couples, young families."

Prior to the pandemic, millennials showed a high propensity toward renting.

"Now, many of those renters are saying, 'no, I'd rather have my own home and have control of it,'" Keenan said.

Amenities

Space for working and exercising at home also was high on the list of what people want post pandemic.

"We probably wouldn't have seen this a year ago. More than any other area, they want to exercise at home versus a local gym," Sward said. "I've seen this in San Diego."

Work space at home also was important, although it didn't have to be a separate room. Respondents wanted flexible spaces.

Movable walls and study alcoves are one option, Keenan said.

Bigger kitchens with more storage space also was a priority among many of those responding.

What they don't care about are big community clubhouses or even swimming pools.

People also want parks and trails in their neighborhood and they're willing to give up personal backyards to get it if they get

other connections to the outdoors, such as decks and balconies.

"In my neighborhood, more people are taking walks than I've ever seen," said Keenan, who lives in Carlsbad.

Following up on the April survey, Keenan, Sward and Slavik-Tsuyuki plan to take a second survey later this year to see if the attitudes prompted by the pandemic are lasting.

The three executives declined to say how much the spent on the April survey.

Besides doing a second survey, they plan to design and build a model home incorporating their findings.

"It's exciting that we're able to design for a future where people want healthy environments in general," Keenan said. ■