

How to find your next builder

Professional resources, former customers can help narrow search.

H.M. Cauley For the AJC

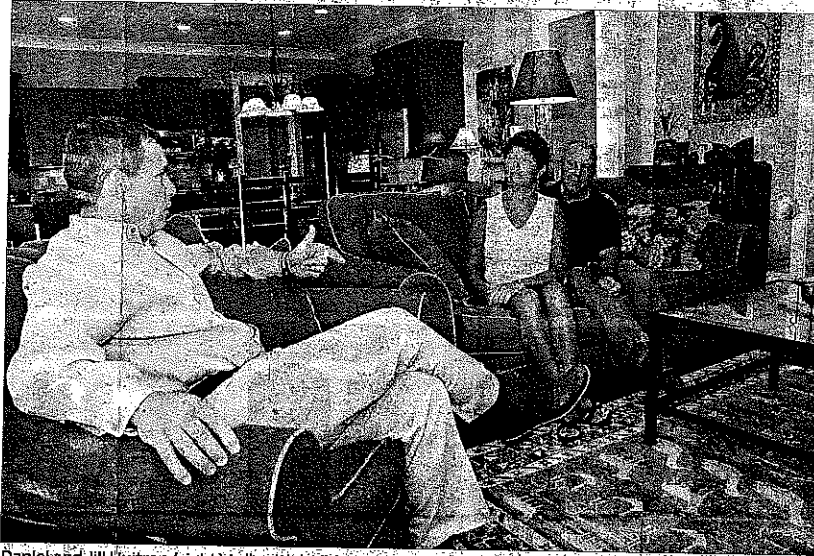
Shopping for a new house can be such an enthralling experience that it's not unusual for buyers to be swept away by their dreams. Visions of gourmet kitchens, dramatic ceilings and glamorous master baths can blur some of the reality of the purchase. Who wants to think about the shrubs in the front yard dying or precisely what the warranty covers when you're standing in a two-story great room with spectacular views?

But building and buying a new home in today's economy has made some consumers more interested in going beyond just the surface details. Many are checking out builder references, speaking to future neighbors and asking tough questions before they sign the sales contract.

Home buyers in the metro area have several resources for finding qualified builders. One place to start is with the Housing Institute, a subsidiary of the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association. Executive director Kim Jones heads the Certified Professional Home Builder program that promotes education, customer service and professionalism among builders. About 15 percent of the GAHB members now carry the CPHB designation.

"This program was started 10 years ago by builders after the Georgia Legislature failed to pass a licensing law for builders," Jones said. "Our philosophy is that every respected industry has a certification program. This one designates builders who strive to be the best they can be."

The GAHB also operates a consumer hotline, as well as a dispute hotline that provides information on area builders. In addition, consumers can research the builder they're considering hiring by contacting the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs and



Daniel and Jill Huitron (right) talk with builder Monte Hewett inside their home in the Riley's Walk community in Smyrna. Photos by Leita Cowart Special

"Feel free to go up to people in their yards and talk to them — they'll tell you a lot."

Monte Hewett, president of Monte Hewett Homes

the Better Business Bureau.

From there, buyers can learn more about their builder by personal contact. That's the process that has worked for Richard Sosbee and his partner, Kevin Aycock, of Hardline Homes. The two recently broke ground on the Estates of Fernwood Creek, a community of about 70 homes from the \$600,000s in Cherokee County.

"The best thing we can do is show people that we know how to build a house," he said. "We have a lot of product to show them and we have homeowners who will vouch that we know what we're doing. Being a small company, we still have that personal contact that allows you to talk to one of the owners and that makes people more comfortable."

Buyers checking out one of the townhouse or single-family communities of Monte Hewett homes will learn that the company president was one of the founders of

What about...

- A few questions to put to your builder from the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association:
 - » Can you give me references of recent buyers?
 - » Do you have a financing plan?
 - » Are there options in the floor plan? Can a basement deck, etc. be added?
 - » Can a room be left unfinished?
 - » How much customizing can I do?
 - » Can appliances be up- or down-graded?
 - » Are there any restrictive covenants?
 - » Are there any additional fees relating to the home or development?
 - » What is your warranty program?
 - » Does the price include landscaping? What happens if the plants die within a year?



Hewett, who's building in Riley's Walk in Smyrna (above), believes that keeping his customers happy is a strong selling point.

the Certified Professional Home Builder Program. From there, he encourages potential customers to spend time talking to his homeowners.

"They can tell you about their experience; they have first-hand knowledge," Hewett said. "Feel free to go up to people in their yards and talk to them — they'll tell you a lot."

"For me, the No. 1 selling feature for a builder is happy customers."

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