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## Realtors peddle homes to bike-happy clients

As gas prices soar, home shoppers are opting for tours on two wheels

**The Associated Press**

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PORTLAND, Ore. - With gas prices high, bicycles flying out of stores and a buyers' market for houses, a handful of real estate agents around the country are touting the two-wheeled appeal of their listings.

Some even show houses exclusively by bike, wheeling through the neighborhood with potential buyers to show off bike lanes and bike-focused businesses and repair shops.

Clad in a purple helmet with plastic flowers dangling from her handlebars, Portland's Kirsten Kaufman is part of a new generation of agents eager to replace the stereotypes of hauling clients around in fancy sedans or SUVs.

The mother of three starting hosting bike tours earlier this summer, doling out energy bars and apricots to a growing tail of clients whose passion for pedaling weighs heavily in their choice of homes. Some are hard-core cyclists. Others are moving into the city to avoid increasingly expensive and onerous commutes.

"It's becoming more common to see families committing to driving less," said Kaufman. "I think it's a part of the market that will continue to grow as gas gets more expensive."

Over the summer, sales of homes dipped by more than 15 percent from last year, according to the National Association of Realtors, leaving Kaufman and other agents looking for ways to spark business.

Bike agents say pedaling with clients is providing that boost. Behind a niche market that represents only a sliver of national sales is a bigger trend — a fundamental shift in the way people think about buying homes.

Real estate agents and industry surveys indicate that home buyers are placing more importance on cutting their gas bills and commute times and that homes near urban centers, and subway, train and bus stops are selling faster than those in the distant suburbs.

In June, a Coldwell Banker survey showed more than 95 percent of agents say rising gas prices are a concern to their clients. More than three quarters of clients say higher fuel costs are increasing their desire for city living.

"Living out in the suburbs just isn't a big deal anymore," says Matt Kolb, a bike agent who owns Pedal to Property, a Boulder, Colo., firm. "People want to live, work and go to school within a six blocks radius — that's changing the way they look at property."

With a team of five agents, Pedal to Property has five agents, a fleet of 48 cruiser bikes and big plans for nationwide expansion. Next year, the company will

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stretch into Oregon and Texas.

"For people who want to drive less, it just makes sense that they'd be looking for different things in a neighborhood," said 35-year-old Emily Gardner, a Portland-woman who has been trolling for a new house with Kaufman on the same bike she uses to pedal into the office each day.

"Kirsten was able to see things about places we were looking that I don't think a normal agent would have noticed," she said.

Circling neighborhoods in northeast Portland, the duo passed on a number of homes. Some were just too far out to ride. Others had no handy place to store the bike or were cut off from easy biking by hostile traffic.

Earlier this month, Bikes Belong, a cycling advocacy group, conducted a 40-state survey that showed more than a third of stores are selling more bikes, and more than 95 percent of shops say customers are citing high gas prices as a reason for transportation-related purchases.

Portland State University urban planning professor Jennifer Dill has studied how neighborhood planning affects cycling habits, and advises homebuyers to look for homes in areas with gridded street patterns and to avoid cul-de-sacs.

"On a bike, you want to minimize stopping," she said. "You're going to want to look at streets with low traffic volume."

But most important, says Dill, is proximity.

Commuters in her Portland-based study rode an average of four miles into the office each day.

Even people who don't bike often are finding bike realty to have advantages.

After months of searching, Gardner and Kaufman found similar success — a two story fixer-upper with a sprawling backyard and turquoise trim —

surrounded by safe streets and easy access.

"I saw the yard and the garage and I said, 'I have to buy this house,'" Gardner said.

But not all agents and clients are cut out for this, cautions Eric Rojas, a Chicago agent who pedals to showings and plans to start urging customers to ride along with him.

"This is a hard job to do on a bike," he said. "You have to get the right people, and the day has to be nice — you have to be looking at property in the same couple mile location."

For some real estate agents the idea of biking with clients is just too casual.

"Anything client-involved should exclude a bicycle," said Portland real estate agent Charles Turner. "If you're meeting someone on location, you're not exactly business-presentable when you show up dripping with sweat."

But Rojas says his clients have learned to accept it.

"If they don't want a sweaty realtor, then maybe they want someone else," he said. "Most people don't care

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— the last clients I took out bought an \$800,000 house — they aren't exactly poor people living off the earth."

As the real estate market continues to slump, Rutgers urban planning professor John Patcher says more agents will turn to niche markets, but that bike agents have tapped into a potentially booming business.

As the popularity of bike commuting continues to rise, Kaufman says she's eager to see how far the wheels of her dark green Trek will take her.

"Ultimately I want to help people find a home that's going to work for them," she said. "This isn't about trying to green-wash real estate or profit from a niche market — it's about helping people make smart decisions, both for themselves and for the planet."

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