

Homearama Visitors See Smaller Homes, Prices

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April Nobles climbed the wooden staircase Saturday afternoon and wandered into one of the home's five bedrooms.

"It's almost like you could live in the master suite," said Nobles, peering into a cavernous bathroom. "That closet is big enough to be a small bedroom."

At 3,600 square feet, the home in the Culpepper Landing development in Deep Creek is the largest among the 12 built for this year's Homearama. The Tidewater Builders Association's annual showcase started at noon Saturday.

This year's show is a departure from recent years in both the size of the homes and their prices. Amid one of the steepest housing declines in decades, show organizers late last year decided to downshift and focus on the middle range of prices.

Last year's show featured homes starting at \$1.2 million. This year, prices are from \$349,900 to \$540,600.

The strategy seems to have paid off so far, with six of the show's homes already spoken for.

"I think they did a really good job staying with the budget this year," said Nobles, 56, a Portsmouth resident who has been to about a dozen local home shows over the years.

"I love to see the new building styles and get ideas for my house," she said. "You come here and see it. Then you go home and say, 'I could do something like that.' "

Homearama originally was scheduled for North Shore at Ridgely Manor, an upscale development in Virginia Beach. It was moved to Hampton Roads Crossing, a northern Suffolk development, then moved again to Culpepper Landing, a 488-acre project of Robinson Development Group between the edges of the Great Dismal Swamp and its canal.

The relocations put the squeeze on builders, who had about four months to get their homes ready.

Herb Watson, president of custom home builder The Walters Co. Inc., hired additional workers to help finish the two homes his company built for the show.

By 2 p.m. Saturday, dozens of visitors were walking up and down Dodd Drive under warm, sunny skies.

For Carl Morrow, 43, the differences between this Homearama and last year's were stark.

"We went last year but kind of wanted to see something more in our reach," he said. "I don't make \$1 million a year."

Morrow and his wife, Barbara, 41, are in the market for a new home, and they arrived early to beat the crowds.

Despite the smaller size, the homes in this year's show feature many amenities seen in years past, such as tall vaulted ceilings, stone kitchen counters and pools.

"You still see some things you're not going to put in your home, a little overkill," Morrow said.