The Green Home Essentials:
5 Sustainability Metrics Every Homebuyer Must Know

A sustainability metric is a quantifiable number used to measure and track the environmental impact of a home.

Sustainability metrics directly affect your total cost of home-ownership. In an era of increasing climate uncertainty, they can help you assess the longevity and security of your investment.

Ultimately, sustainability metrics provide standardized data that allow you to compare one property to another on crucial criteria that will affect your family's financial and physical well-being for years to come.

Here are five sustainability metrics to discuss with your REALTOR®:

1. The Energy Performance Rating (HERS Index or ENERGY STAR Score)

The single most common and valuable savings metric for existing and new homes.

What it is

A numerical score, often from a Home Energy Rating System (HERS Index) or the ENERGY STAR program. It is the best predictor of future utility bills and provides a standardized, objective way to compare a green home against a code-built one.

HERS Index: Scores are relative, with 100 representing a standard new home, and 0 being a Net-Zero Energy Home.

ENERGY STAR: Indicates the home meets strict energy efficiency guidelines set by the EPA.

Ask your REALTOR®: *"What is the home's HERS Index Score? What are the average monthly utility bills compared to a standard new home?"*

2. Low/Zero-VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) Materials Use

Addresses indoor air quality in new and existing homes.

What it is

The quantification or certification that building materials (paints, adhesives, sealants and flooring) emit very low to no harmful chemicals into the home's air.
This can be especially valuable to those with allergies or sensitivities.

Ask your REALTOR®: *"What steps were taken to ensure healthy indoor air quality? Did the homeowner use low-VOC materials or high-efficiency air filtration?"*

3. Water-Saving Fixture Certifications (Such as the EPA WaterSense)

These impact water cost savings and conservation.

What it is

A simple binary check (Yes/No) against the EPA's WaterSense label, which is given to products like toilets, faucets, and shower-heads that are at least 20% more water-efficient than average, while still providing satisfactory performance. Since 2019, California has required all residential properties to have water-conserving fixtures installed (Note: this is not a point-of-sale requirement -- if the property is non-compliant, the seller must include that information in their disclosures).

Ask your REALTOR®: *"Are the toilets and showerheads EPA WaterSense certified?"*

4. Climate Resilience/ Flood Risk Score

This measure of risk can be especially relevant to California homebuyers in wildfire, mudslide or flood-prone areas.

What it is

A numerical risk rating (often from third-party services such FortressFire's Wildfire Disclosure Report or FEMA's flood maps) that measures a property's vulnerability to specific climate hazards like flooding, heat or wildfire
(Note: in California, buyers also typically receive a Natural Hazards Disclosure Report telling them if the property is located in certain hazard zones). These scores are used as risk management tools to help buyers understand the long-term cost of ownership, such as insurance premiums and potential property damage.

Ask your REALTOR®: *"What is the property's specific flood or wildfire risk score?"*

5. Commute/Walk/ Transit Score

A location's score is a critical social sustainability metric that directly impacts lifestyle, transportation costs and carbon footprint.

What it is

A numerical rating (like the Walk Score, Bike Score or Transit Score) that measures the property's proximity to amenities, transit and jobs. This can demonstrate the savings (both financial and carbon-related) from a reduced reliance on driving.

Ask your REALTOR®: *"What essential services (groceries, pharmacy, transit stop) can I reliably access near this home without needing a car?"*