

This Colorado mountain town is producing the future of workforce housing

Fading West factory is supplying 16 duplex units for the Third Street project in Eagle, which breaks ground next week

News [FOLLOW NEWS](#) | Jun 15, 2023



Scott Miller [FOLLOW](#)
smiller@vaildaily.com



The Farm, a subdivision in Buena Vista, in the shadow of the Collegiate Peaks.

Matt Andrews/courtesy photo

BUENA VISTA — The Eagle County Board of Commissioners on Tuesday visited the factory building some of the new homes in the valley.

The commissioners and several people from the county's housing department traveled to Buena Vista to tour the home of the Fading West factory. It's where Habitat for Humanity Vail Valley, Eagle County School District, the town of Eagle and Eagle County are sourcing 16 duplex units for the [Third Street project](#), which breaks ground next week.

Eagle County has also placed a [deposit with Fading West](#) for 20 apartment units to be sited in Edwards near Colorado Mountain College.

On the drive to Buena Vista, Commissioner Matt Scherr noted that Fading West is the closest home manufacturer to Eagle County. Choosing factory-built homes is simply more efficient, Scherr said.

Building homes in a factory is similar to the reason that Ford in the early 20th century started building cars on an assembly line.

At the factory, Eric Schaefer, Fading West's chief business development officer, led the tour of the massive facility. Housing units move from station to station until they're ready to be wrapped and trucked away. The factory is sending parts of homes — from entire smallish accessory units to large blocks of apartments or pieces of homes — to communities from Durango to Eagle.

Shipping to Breck

Units are about to be delivered to Breckenridge for a 60-unit project next to the Summit County Justice Center. The first units are shipping soon, and cranes will set the 76-foot units on foundations at the Breckenridge site.

Schaefer noted that the Breckenridge project received its government approvals in about six months, a fast-tracked process that would have taken about two years under a normal schedule.



Eagle County Commissioners Jeanne McQueeney, left, Kathy Chandler-Henry, center, and Matt Scherr, right, on a tour of The Farm, a project of factory-built homes in Buena Vista.

Matt Andrews/courtesy photo

The first tenants should start moving in this fall.

It takes only a few days to complete a module, Schaefer said. On the tour, Schaefer pointed out the material going into the units, including engineered timber and other high-durability pieces.

Units are delivered nearly finished, including with windows installed. That fact impressed Scherr, who noted that windows tend to be tricky to ship.

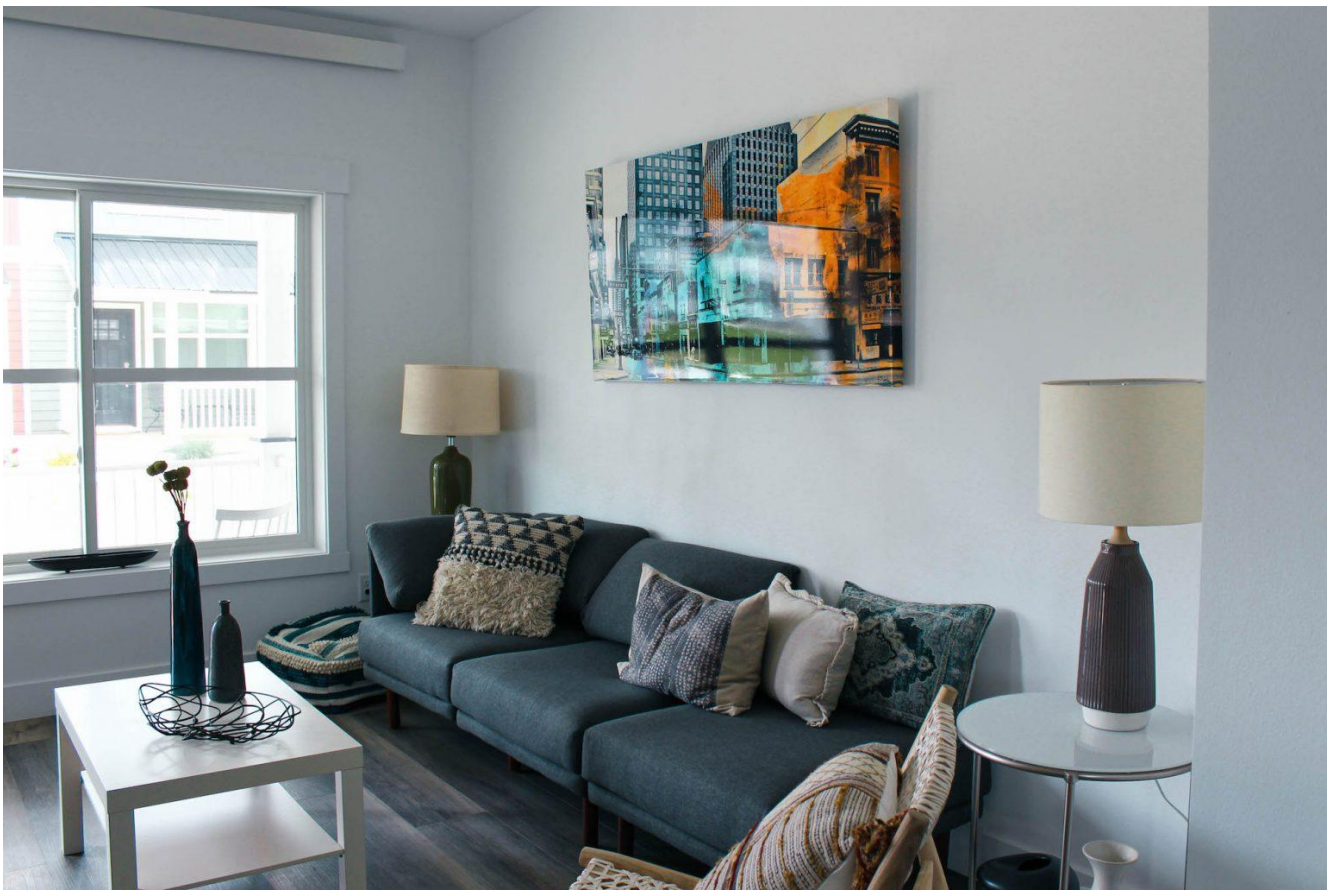
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Schaefer said the company started about seven years ago with a development project in Buena Vista. At that time, no one in the company had an idea of actually building a factory.

Instead, the company started buying factory-built homes from a company in Nebraska. But transportation and communication struggles led company officials to believe they could do better.

The \$25 million factory was funded during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the work was done a bit more than 18 months ago.

“Our feeling was that we were manufacturers, not stick build (units) under a roof,” Schaefer said. “That’s really where we’ve been getting a lot of discussion around the state.”



The interior of a model home at The Farm, the Fading West subdivision in Buena Vista.
Matt Andrews/courtesy photo

The concept, Schaefer said is for Fading West to think of itself more like an auto manufacturer that builds housing.

The company has adopted a Toyota-like “lean” manufacturing philosophy. There’s enough material on the factory floor to build the next batch of homes. The company has also limited its product to just six or seven models, Schaefer said.

Don't say 'modular'

Fading West Chief Business Development Officer Eric Schaefer said he was meeting recently with people from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development when he learned what not to call the housing units built in Buena Vista.

“It’s ‘off-site’ housing because ‘modular’ infers (a mobile home),” Schaefer said.

The build-our-own idea quickly expanded beyond Buena Vista.

“This is a statewide problem,” Schaefer said. “So how can we do our part to help solve the affordable housing crisis that we’re facing now?”

That’s led to partnerships with a number of communities and agencies that need housing for their own people. The Colorado Department of Transportation is setting Fading West homes on a site in Fairplay.

While only a few models are available, Schaefer said it’s easy to imagine a number of uses for the accessory dwelling unit modules. Those one-bedroom units are about 475 square feet.



Fading West started building "off-site" homes for its own project, The Farm, in Buena Vista.
Scott Miller/smiller@vaildaily.com

Commissioner Kathy Chandler-Henry asked if Eagle County could purchase a number of the accessory units. The idea could be to offer homeowners incentives to add those units to existing homes, whether above garages or somewhere on a lot.

A few of the homes have over-garage accessory units at The Farm, the subdivision in Buena Vista that started it all. The Eagle County contingent toured a few of the completed homes and came away impressed.

On the drive back to Eagle County, Scherr said he thought the operation is "very cool. They seem to be very well built."

Given the impressions from the tour, the Fading West name may pop up more often in Eagle County.