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DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

Green homes ripen

Efficient, less-polluting building on rise

By Jenny Burns

The Sun News

Examples of green building - making construction and remodeling choices that save natural resources and limit the impact of building on nature - are popping up all over the Coastal Carolinas like seedlings.

A new study says green building is going mainstream, and experts estimate the sales of green homes will at least triple in five years.

A developer in Brunswick County, N.C., is building townhomes that will be certified green by the N.C. Healthy Built Homes.

The developers of Withers Preserve on the former Air Force base are planning to use all eco-friendly appliances in their homes.

A builder in Pawleys Island specializes in building homes with good indoor air quality for folks with asthma and allergies.

A green Habitat for Humanity home in Georgetown County will likely be the first of its kind on the Strand - offering the homeowner lower energy bills and better indoor air quality.

A group of builders and architects on the Strand are meeting to start a local chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council.

In a world of rising energy costs, global warming and dwindling natural resources, experts say homeowners want to do their part to help.

Going green can simply mean buying energy-efficient heating systems or windows when you remodel, or downsizing into a smaller home, experts say. It's a move that can save you money on your electric bill - and help conserve energy.

"Living [in a] small [home] is green because you're using less energy. Insulating well and using less heating and cooling is green. Having natural landscape instead of sod is green. Having good indoor air quality is green. So is recycling in your home," said Dan Abel, director of the Campus and Community Sustainability Initiative at Coastal Carolina University.

New research by McGraw Hill Construction and the National Association of Home Builders shows green homeowners say they're happier with their green homes than with their previous ones and eager to recommend it to others.

The survey found the main motivation to going green was saving money on operating and maintenance costs. Other big motivators were environmental concerns and family health.

The green home industry represents a market of \$1.8 billion for 2005, about 0.3 percent of the entire home construction market, the study said.

It's expected to grow to at least \$6.5 billion by 2010 and possibly as much as \$19.6 billion.

More builders are recognizing the benefits of building green, the survey says, but many say the major roadblock is still the greater cost.

When Loris resident Daren Watson decided she wanted to build her new home with structurally insulated panels - a green, energy efficient way to build walls - she couldn't find a local builder to do it.

So she found a company in Charleston, The Verdi Group, which sells the panels, and hired them to train a local framer to do the work.

Her former home in the Northeast, built with the panels, called SIPs, was quiet and efficient, and she wanted the same qualities again.

"After living in a SIPs house, you don't want to live in anything else," Watson said. "It's real tight and real quiet."

David Hill, the owner of Verdi, which sells only green home products and builds green homes, said he looks for ways to make building green cost-effective.

Bamboo flooring is cheaper than hardwood floors. Recycling job site materials is cheaper in Charleston than paying to have a Dumpster because there's a recycling company that picks up the waste.

Sometimes you have to think about the whole project to see the cost savings.

A tankless water heater costs about \$300 more than a traditional one, but Hill points out that traditional water heaters require about 6 square feet of space and are often stored in a closet that has to be built.

"So how much does 6 square feet cost?" he said.

He says high energy bills have made consumers wake up to the idea of green building, just like high gas prices pushed the manufacturing of hybrid cars.

"Sometimes as consumers we need a little kick in the pants," he said. "If this carpet and that carpet have roughly the same price, and one is greener because of less off-gassing, why not use the greener one? If you can use 50 percent less energy and water, why not?"

Green townhomes

Developer Buddy Milliken of Woodsong in Shallotte, N.C, said home buyers are thinking more about green living, but in ways they can see immediate benefit - like lower bills, better air quality and enjoying the indigenous landscape that was left alone in development.

"It needs to make common sense," he said.

The townhomes that Milliken will build will leave less impact on the natural environment, and hopefully save homeowners money in the long term, he said. Milliken is still working out the price for the 1,600-square-foot townhomes, which will start preselling in the next few weeks.

Water that runs down the gutters will be used to make a fountain in the courtyard flow and provide irrigation.

All appliances and the washer and dryer will be Energy Star rated, and fixtures on toilets and sinks will conserve water. The homes will have energy-efficient windows, tankless water heaters, efficient light bulbs and use paints with less harmful gases.

Milliken said beyond all these reasons to build green, he thinks people "want to be psychologically connected to the natural environment."

'It's the right thing to do'

The survey found 92 percent of builders say the best reason to build green is because "it's the right thing to do."

Developer RWO Acquisitions of New York, which is building Withers Preserve as part of the urban village on the former Air Force base, said they agree.

"We strongly believe that eco-friendly communities is the wave of the future. It's just good business," said spokesman Liam Sullivan.

The development group looked at ways they could help the environment and save homeowners money in the long term when planning Withers, he said.

They found the answer in a type of General Electric appliances called Ecomagination.

Withers is currently in negotiations with GE to use their energy-efficient products in the development. GE says its Ecomagination compact fluorescent light bulbs offer energy savings of 70 percent to 75 percent and last up to 10 times longer than incandescent bulbs.

"This will be a prototype community when it's done. We're looking to build a legacy for this area," he said.

In the national survey, 74 percent of homeowners said their new green homes were showing lower operating costs in the first year.

Healthy living

Stan Budzinski, owner of Healthwise Homes in Pawleys Island, started his business eight years ago when he needed to build a home for his wife, who has chemical sensitivity.

Now he builds for people with asthma, allergies and those just concerned about the air they breathe.

He uses ultraviolet lights in the duct work to kill mold, reduces plastics, uses natural fibered carpets or just hardwood floors, organic carpet pads, geothermal heating systems and paints that don't give off harmful gases.

"They know what they're allergic to, and we build to that," he said.

The national survey showed 74 percent of green homeowners believed they would see health care cost savings thanks to their green home.

Remodeling

Experts say the new way of looking at green building is that every little bit helps.

"It's not as if, if you don't start from the ground up, it's not worth doing anything," said Jeff Pollack, interim coordinator of North Inlet-Winyah Bay Coastal Training Program.

The survey found that half of American homeowners had recently done some renovation on their homes, and about 40 percent of them used some kind of green product.

Calling that a "powerful finding," Harvey M. Bernstein of McGraw-Hill Construction, said it shows the community is more aware of green products and they are using them.

The most common green remodeling purchases were energy efficient windows and HVAC units, the survey found.

"There are things that people can do in retrofit with little investment and get pretty good return," Pollack said.

More than one quarter of remodelers surveyed by NAHB saw growing demand for green remodeling late last year, compared to just 6 percent reporting less demand. The majority of remodelers already incorporate energy efficiency into their work.

Getting the word out

Homeowners like Watson say education is all it will take to get future homeowners to turn green.

The surveys showed that green homebuyers are most likely to be affluent, well-educated, female, and in their 40s.

Abel said the Habitat for Humanity home was built to teach the public that green can be built on any scale - and in a low-priced home.

He estimates the home's new owner will save 50 percent on energy bills. Abel estimates a buyer can put \$3,000 worth of green improvements in a home and get a net gain of \$50 back a month.

"Everybody should be building like this," he said. "Pretty soon people are going to have to make the connection between our lifestyles and the global climate crisis."

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Costs vs. benefits

Reasons to build "green," according to homeowners surveyed:

Operational cost savings

Environmental concerns

My health and that of my family

Potential for greater home resale value

Obstacles in buying green, according to the survey:

Lack of buyer education, awareness

High cost

Lack of availability in the area where I wanted to buy

Green building perceived as a fad

Source: McGraw Hill Construction survey

Install maximum insulation in the area to be remodeled.

Install high-efficiency windows instead of those that just meet the energy code.

Seal all exterior penetrations in the area being remodeled.

Purchase only Energy Star-rated appliances.

Install only low-flow water fixtures.

Upgrade to an Energy Star-rated water heater, or better yet a tankless water heater.

Purchase the highest efficiency HVAC system you can afford.

Source: National Association of

Home Builders

HTMLInfoBox~~Examples of ways to build green

High-efficiency HVAC

Allergen-free, chemical-free building materials

Use of native and/or drought-resistant plants

Recycled or salvaged building materials

Water-conserving appliances

Geothermal heat pump

Ground water system

Steel structured insulated panels orinsulating concrete forms

Solar heating

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