

Green buildings offer cost savings

Written by

Lindsay Downey
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Helping homebuyers realize the benefits of sustainable construction sometimes comes down to one factor: the dollar sign.

"They want to know how these energy-efficient features are saving them money," said Cara Kane, director of corporate communications for KB Home, builder of the Bayshore Commons community in North Fort Myers.

"What does it really mean when you have low-e windows or a radiant barrier roof?" Kane said. "What does that mean for their pocketbook?"

The average U.S. household spends at least \$2,000 per year on energy bills, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. More than half of that goes toward heating and cooling costs.

At Florida Green Team, a south Fort Myers-based company that works to make homes more energy efficient, clients' questions often revolve around how products will impact their monthly bills, said Noah Blanco, director of energy conservation.

"Often we find that folks will call and request one product because they have

heard that product is going to save them a lot of money," Blanco said.

But the economic downturn has made homebuyers more price-sensitive when it comes to implementing sustainable features, Kane said.

At Tundra Homes, a Cape Coral-based builder specializing in eco-friendly dwellings, clients have scaled back recently on adding sustainable products to their homes. Cash-strapped homebuyers are focusing on the immediate costs of construction, rather than the savings over time, Tundra President David Gydosh said.

"When the economy was good, people were like, 'Oh, yeah. Let's do something (sustainable).' They've kind of gotten away from that," Gydosh said.

"It's just about the dollars right now. We actually have to talk them into going with the energy-efficient stuff."

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to renew the Florida Solar Rebate Program may have played a role in what Gydosh sees as a decline in solar panel investment.

The Tundra owner said he installed panels at his home at a cost of more than \$40,000.

He received an approximately \$12,000 federal credit. But like others who installed the panels, Gydosh said he didn't receive the roughly \$20,000 rebate he expected from the state.

Calculating costs

To help homebuyers see the long-term benefits of sustainability, Tundra is working on ways to calculate savings. Gydosh often shows clients his own utility bill, which he said reached as high as \$700 at his former residence. The bill at his Tundra-built home ranges from about \$150 to \$200 per month, he said.

KB Home in February introduced an Energy Performance Guide that helps homeowners understand the cost benefits of sustainable construction. The national builder now gives buyers a numerical rating of their home's energy efficiency, along with an estimate of monthly gas and electricity costs.

"It's going to change the way consumers shop for a home," Kane said.

KB Home uses a Home Energy Rating System (HERS) developed by the Residential Energy Services Network to

estimate utility costs. An average resale home might have a HERS score of about 130, while new homes rank about 100. The environmentally friendly homes KB builds have average HERS scores between 80 and 85, indicating lower energy usage, Kane said.

Savings impact

In 2009, Tundra began construction on what was said to be the first home on Pine Island certified by the Florida Green Building Coalition.

Homeowner Harold Bruner, 62, a real estate agent with Sandals Realty in Fort Myers, said Gydosh approached him about the certification and offered to pay the coalition fees. Bruner agreed when he realized the long-term payoff from insulation, energy efficient appliances and other additions would bring.

"I was willing to invest in what I thought would be cost-saving features," Bruner

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said. "It just so happens society has this green concept and the two basically went hand-in-hand."

The most recent electricity bill for Bruner's approximately 1,500-square-foot home was \$71, he said. The homeowner said he can't compare it to his prior Sanibel residence, where he had a pool and about 5,000 more square feet of space. Still, he feels confident the sustainable features of his new home are cutting costs over time.

"I consider it an investment in things like insulated glass because I think it's highly likely that utility costs are going to continue to rise the rest of my life," Bruner said.

"I have a comfortable feeling that the extra we paid for the energy efficiency is really paying off for us in the bills that we see."

- Buildings accounted for 72 percent of total U.S. electricity consumption in 2006. This number is estimated to rise to 75 percent by 2025. Fifty-one percent of the total was attributed to residential building use, while 49 percent was attributed to commercial building usage.
- Of the total energy consumption in the average household, 50 percent goes to space heating, 27 percent to run appliances, 19 percent to heat water and 4 percent to air conditioning.
- About 8 percent of U.S. energy demand goes to treating, pumping and heating water and is equal to enough electricity to power more than 5 million homes for an entire year.
- \$4 billion is spent annually in the U.S. for energy to run drinking water and wastewater utilities. If this could be reduced by just 10 percent through better efficiency, it could save \$400 million a year.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



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Noah Blanco, director of energy conservation with Florida Green Team, stands in front of solar panels used for heating or cooling pools. / Molly Zolman/news-press.com

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