LOCAL NEWS

Recession building interest in 'green' houses

Energy-efficient options becoming more affordable, homebuilders say

By Nan Lundeen
STAFF WRITER
nlundeen@greenvillenews.com

At a time when the recession has dumped the housing market into the basement, builders say energy-efficient homes are selling, especially affordable ones for young people in their first home and retirees with a wary eye on rising utility bills when they're living on a fixed income.

"I have seen a real uptick of interest in people looking for ways to save energy because of the economic conditions," said Elwood Hamilton, spokesman for the South Carolina Energy Office.

"Sales have been steady," said John Groome, a partner in Greenville-based Dovetail Creative Homes building affordable EnergyStar houses in several Upstate locations.

Developer Jeff Randolph of Greenville-based The Randolph Group said, "I think that you are seeing that trend." Energy savers used to be affordable only in high-end homes, but now they're more practical, easier to install and less expensive, Randolph said.

"You're seeing some of these energy-saving devices and systems filter down into the lower price ranges," Randolph said.

Dovetail is building EnergyStar homes in the $180,000 range, reaching out to folks such as police, firefighters and teachers, according to Dovetail partner Walter Brashier III.

Spec houses are rising out of the ground at Greer's O'Neal Village on North State 101, and all five builders are energy-conscious, according to Randolph, who is developing the 595-unit community on 186 acres.

Water heaters are a traditional energy gobbler, and Bruce Wood, chairman of the South Carolina Solar Council and owner of Greer-based Sunstore Solar, says a solar thermal system to heat water will pay for itself in six to seven years. The system costs up to $6,000 to serve a family of four, and you get a 25 percent state tax credit, a 30 percent federal tax credit, and save about $400 a year on utility bills, he said.

Greer resident Cindy Phillips, her husband Jean and their two children love the solar water heating system they installed last month in their home.

Their Jacuzzi is now affordable, they don't run out of hot water for showers, laundry or dishwashing, and they're saving $30 on their utility bill, she said.

EnergyStar homes must be 15 percent more efficient than a house just built to code, said Donald Starling, a certified home energy rater.

The homes require EnergyStar inspections that look at everything from heat duct leakage to insulation to windows to solar water heaters. This means there are fewer maintenance issues because there's another set of third-party inspections, Brashier said.

"It's more work, but it's worth it because it's what the market wants, and these houses are selling," Brashier said.



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Bruce Wood, left, Walter Brashier III, John Groome and Jim Beischer look over plans for an energy-efficient house near Greer on Friday.

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