

# Coming to a suburb near you: green homes

As demand and incentives grow, eco-friendly houses move into mainstream

By Charisse Jones  
USA Today

The new houses that will line a rural tract in suburban New Jersey will have walls insulated by blue jeans. In Dallas-Fort Worth, a starter home will come with a computer-controlled vent that pulls in fresh air.

The "green" movement that has spurred schools to discourage paper lunch bags and motorists to trade in gas-guzzling SUVs for hybrids is creeping into the housing market.

"You're beginning to see critical mass, beginning to see it not just be a niche," said Calli Schmidt, director of environmental communications for the National Association of Home Builders, a group of more than 800 state and local home-building organizations.

Growing awareness among builders and homebuyers of environmentally friendly building materials and methods, plus government efforts to address climate change, are fueling the focus on eco-friendly single-family homes, environmental advocates say.

"We're starting to see a greater focus on incentivizing green residential building," said Jason Hartke of the U.S. Green Building Council, a collective based in Washington, D.C.

"When you think about the idea that 40 percent of our carbon emissions in the U.S. comes from buildings, and about half of that is residential, we've got to address all our building types."

While the council's standards, known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, pre-

viously applied to commercial buildings, a rating system for homes will be unveiled this month.

Currently, 500 builders participate in LEED for Homes' pilot phase, and roughly 10,000 homes are being constructed to meet the organization's standards, Mitchell said.

Some cities where the trend is taking hold:

◆ Starting this past week in Cincinnati, residents won't pay city property taxes for 15 years on homes that are built or rehabilitated to LEED standards.

◆ In Dallas-Fort Worth, McGuyer Homebuilders, which builds about 800 single-family homes a year in the area, now will build all new residences according to criteria set by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Dallas Home Builders Association.

Under its "ecosmart program," new homes, ranging from starter houses selling for \$120,000 to million-dollar residences, will include features such as denser filters for air conditioning ducts and programmable thermostats to conserve energy, said Division President Steven Hayes.

◆ In Wood River, Ill., ground was broken this past week for a development that will include roughly 150 single-family homes built to green guidelines set by the National Association of Home Builders. Vegetation will be planted to help clean rain water and slow its runoff, eliminating the need for storm drains.

Matt Belcher, whose company is managing the Wood River development, built his first green single-family home community this year in the St. Louis suburb of Kirkwood. The community's houses were arranged so most windows face

south, making the best use of solar heating and cooling.

◆ In Bernards Township, N.J., a dozen homes are being planned to blend into the surrounding rural environment.

Paints and glues used in the homes won't have the usual smell because they won't contain chemicals known as volatile organic compounds, said developer Anthony Sblendorio, president of Back to Nature Ecological Design and Development.

The play area on the 89-acre site will use recycled tree logs and stumps instead of the rubber found in jungle gyms. Recycled cotton — mostly from blue jeans — will be used for home insulation.

The development, whose home prices are expected to start at \$3 million, also will have a wetlands area to treat storm water.

"We're not just focusing on limiting damage to the environment and building green homes," Sblendorio said. "How do we design so there's increased soil health, increased biodiversity, increased habitat?"

Levittown, N.Y., the community often called the nation's first suburb, is launching an effort that will offer discounts and low-cost financing to enable residents to buy energy-efficient appliances for their homes. "Easy environmentalism is what we call it," said Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi.

Building green can be more expensive, some developers say. While buyers may recoup the costs through utility savings, steeper price tags for design or special appliances may put off some builders, Hayes said.

For a growing number of homeowners, however, green features are a necessity.

"That was absolutely important for my family and for having my kids grow up in a healthy environment," said Maren Engelmohr. In July, her family moved into one of the five homes that will make up the Kirkwood, Mo., development.

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