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Green building booms in WNC

Paul Clark

Stan Corwin gets pretty excited talking about flushing his toilets. He believes his house in Chunns Cove has one of the state's first recycled gray water systems.

The system Corwin loves uses water from bathroom sinks and showers to flush the toilet. He and wife Colette moved into their renovated house in March and have been extolling its green features ever since.

"It's been very important to us to leave as light a footprint on the earth as we possibly can," said Stan Corwin, a retired patent attorney for General Electric. "Every feature and ingredient in building this house is based on what's the energy used to manufacture the product, the energy used to transport it and if it's a sustainable product."

Green building is "spreading like wildfire," said Jim Demos, of Demos Builders: An Appalachian Green Builder, who built the Corwins' home.

"They know it'll save them money in the long run, especially with gas prices skyrocketing," Demos said. "It's hip, stylish and sexy. And it's the right thing to do."

Cheaper in the long run

The N.C. HealthyBuilt Homes program is a voluntary, statewide green building certification program. The number of certified and finished HealthyBuilt homes in Western North Carolina more than doubled between June 2007 and January 2008 — from 51 to 125, according to the Western North Carolina Green Building Council.

Green homes in progress increased nearly fivefold — from 100 to 482. Currently, there are 668 in development, the council reports.

The number of HealthyBuilt homes for sale in the county jumped from 11 in the year preceding June 19, 2007, to 113 in the year preceding June 19, 2008, according to the WNC Regional Multiple Listing Service, a tool that real estate professionals use to list and sell homes.

"This is not a fad. This is the future," said Pat "Tree" Spaulding, a certified environmental consultant for Keller Williams Professionals real estate company in Asheville. She provided the MLS numbers above. "These homes are more durable, healthier and far more energy-efficient. Why would anyone want to buy anything else in the world as we are now experiencing it?"

"Everything (green) is going through the roof and shows no sign of stopping," said Stephens Farrell of Stephens Smith Farrell Architecture in Asheville. "The thought of owning a 4,500-square-foot, poorly conceived and insulated house 45 minutes from work send shivers down people's spines when they think about \$4.50 gas."

Farrell is the architect on a house on Cantrell Mountain south of Brevard that should be ready for its owners this month. They wanted a house that produces more electricity than it consumes. Farrell suggested a photovoltaic system — a typical residential system costs about \$40,000 — that feeds excess energy into the electrical grid. Every three months, the owners should get a check from Duke Energy, Farrell said.

Their super-insulated house reduces its energy needs by using a geothermal heat pump, which uses the consistency of the earth's temperature — about 55 degrees five feet below the surface — to heat and cool. The house, with solar hot water, stays cool in summer and warm in winter because of its living roof — a mat of live sedum that needs watering the first year but none later, barring a searing drought.

Bigger than it was

In its Enka Hills subdivision, Asheville Area Habitat for Humanity built 16 HealthyBuilt homes in 2007 and plans to build the same number this year, communications manager Ariane Kjellquist said. All have non-toxic water-based paints and high-efficiency appliances. Its largest four-bedroom house won't cost more than \$34 a month to heat or cool, Kjellquist said.

There are more than a dozen LEED-registered buildings in WNC, said Matt Siegel, director of Western North Carolina Green Building Council. LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — is a voluntary, consensus-based national standard for developing high-performance, sustainable buildings. Siegel is working with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians on the largest LEED-certified project in WNC — a 470,000-square-foot, three-building school complex under construction.

"For years, we have been having Realtors saying, 'We have a customer (for green housing), but there's nothing out there,'" Siegel said. "They didn't have 50 different options as far as size and price."

"I've got clients who moved to Seattle just to buy a green-certified home," real estate agent Michael Figura said. "And they came here, and (green homes) are all over the place."

Energy prices are one reason green building is so popular, Siegel said. As a result "a lot of our green builders haven't seen the downturn in real estate that others have," he said. Developers of large communities are coming to the council for its advice on how to build green. In two and half years, the council's membership has grown from 150 to 520.

Eco Concepts Realty completed Hudson Street Cottages, a green development off State Street in West Asheville. Now it's working on Gaia, another green development of clustered homes on Shelbourne Road. Gaia has solar heating and hot water, water-saving toilets, bamboo and stained concrete floors.

Ed and Kate Daigle are moving into a condo at Gaia this fall. They live in a 1930s house in Brevard that other than the grass, isn't green at all, Ed Daigle said. The move is philosophically based — he believes that global warming is the world's most pressing matter.

Michael Figura owns Eco Concepts Realty. He's also a planner at GreenPlan, an Asheville company that promotes sustainable development. And he's chairman of the Eco Consultants Association, a division of Asheville Board of Realtors.

"It's the best way we can impact the sustainability of our culture," Figura said. "We only have one earth. We've got kids and want to try to leave it a better place than we found it."

Green with envy

Got a green home you're dying to show off? ECO (the Environmental and Conservation Organization) is organizing its first green home tour in August in conjunction with the Southern Energy and Environment Expo on Aug. 23. It is looking for homes in Transylvania, Henderson or south Buncombe counties. Call 692-0385 or visit www.eco-wnc.org.

Eco-friendly home features

The N.C. HealthyBuilt Homes program has an extensive checklist that calculates eco-friendly aspects of a dwelling before designating it as a HealthyBuilt home. Green features at Stan and Colette Corwin's Chunns Cove home include:

- n Recycled gray water system.
- n Salvaged building materials.
- n Sealed crawlspace.
- n Locally milled/fabricated cabinets with FSC-certified zero-formaldehyde hardwood plywood.
- n Decking and hardwood floors made of sunken river wood.
- n Natural cork bathroom floors.
- n Zero-VOC Earthpaint in interior and on decking.
- n Icynene insulation throughout.
- n Rain harvesting.
- n Wood-burning stove.

n Tankless water heaters.
n Looped on-demand hot-water delivery system.
