

When less is more

Built Green construction standards yield savings, peace of mind for eco-savvy homebuyers

Pedro Arrais

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As a wildlife biologist, Mike Preston sees first-hand how house construction can negatively affect flora and fauna. So, when it came to purchasing a new home, he and his wife Joanna -- also a wildlife biologist -- chose a house that was sensitive to the environment as much as it was energy efficient.

"As biologists, we are very aware of our environmental footprint. Our choice to buy is based on our desire to minimize our footprint," says Mike, 36, who serves as a consultant.

Their Langford home, which they moved into in February, was built to a Built Green standard, a new building rating system that makes it easy for consumers to evaluate a house by its green footprint.

Home builders in British Columbia and Alberta are starting to warm to Built Green, a voluntary, industry-driven program administered by the Canadian Home Builders' Association.

While the better-known Energuide is a measurement of how energy-efficient a house is, Built Green-certified houses reflect low-impact house construction practices.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

For wildlife biologist Mike Preston, the reduced environmental footprint was a key reason he and wife Joanna chose to buy this Built Green home in Langford.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

For the Prestons, going green has also saved some green. In their previous 30-year-old, 900-square-foot condo, the combined energy and water bill came to \$279 a month. In their current 1,650-square-foot three-bedroom, two-bath house, the bill is \$95 for the same services.

Preston credits the combination of higher insulation, low-e coated windows and low-flow toilets for the drop in energy costs. "We were expecting the bill to drop, but the amount was still a pleasant surprise."

"The program is not just about energy, its about environmental sustainability," says M.J. Whitemarsh, CEO of the Canadian Homebuilders' Association of British Columbia.

"It is a measuring tool that addresses the heightened environmental awareness of consumers. It does not get hung up on energy efficiency, but looks at the house as a whole."

She says consumers' awareness is shifting. "It's not just about cold winters anymore. Instead, people now care about the quality of the air in a home, looking for construction materials that do not produce off-gases."

The Built Green program addresses the public's desire for social responsibility, though it's not all about what consumers see. "Saving energy is not as sexy as a granite countertop," says Whitemarsh.

There has been a constant stream of people wanting to take a look at "The Greenhouse," the nickname given to the first Built Green Gold house in the Sunriver development in Sooke.

In the bathroom, Preston installed a skylight to reduce use of electrical lighting and a low-flush toilet to lower water consumption.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist
At Sunriver Estates in Sooke, Citta Construction is now building only Built Green homes, designed to meet environmental and energy-efficient guidelines set by a program developed by the Canadian Homebuilders' Association.



CREDIT: Darren Stone, Times Colonist
At Sunriver Estates in Sooke, hardwood flooring and granite countertops were used because they don't produce off-gases as other materials do, such as carpeting.

"People are demanding a healthy home," says Blair Watling of Newport Realty, the agent for Sunriver Estates. "It's more than just energy efficiency now."

He says interest in the new house reflects changing consumer priorities. Consumers are exhibiting a greater awareness of issues such as air quality and environmental impact when evaluating a house.

The Greenhouse was built by Citta Construction, exclusive builder in Sunriver. The company is the latest Built Green certified builder in Victoria, joining 243 other builders in Alberta and B.C. that have adopted the standard.



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"It's the right thing to do," says Bill Patterson, president of Citta Construction. "It makes us aware of environmental issues, yet doesn't cost a lot to approach construction in a responsible manner." All new construction at Sunriver will now be Built Green-certified, he says.

Patterson predicts programs that encourage environmentally responsible construction like Built Green will become mainstream. He acknowledges that the cost of upgrading the new homes can add an extra \$2,000 to the price. But lower energy costs over the life of the house justifies the expense, he says.

Buyers can also upgrade to the Gold standard, which can add an extra five per cent to the price of the house, or roughly \$15,000. The payback is a house that can save up to 50 gigajoules of energy annually -- a typical home uses approximately 130 gigajoules -- and reduce carbon emissions by two tonnes as well.

A typical three-bedroom, two-bath house in the Sunriver development costs between \$350,000 and \$560,000.

On Sept. 1, 2007, Saanich became the first municipality in British Columbia to offer rebates of 10 per cent, 20 per cent and 30 per cent for building permits of homes built to Built Green bronze, silver and gold standards respectively. Saanich follows Calgary and Edmonton, which introduced similar incentives this year.

With building permits costing an average of \$4,500, developers can realize rebates of up to \$1,350 to offset the increased costs associated with building more energy-efficient homes.

"Energy-efficient homes put less stress on the municipality's infrastructure.

This results in less demand for water and energy. The rebate is a way to encourage new developments to build healthier communities," says Russ Fuoco, director of planning for the District of Saanich. He says the pilot program has funds for approximately 50 homes.

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