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Newport - building green to save green

Photo by Aeneas Ford Kent LeSueur, president of Newport Homebuilders, and Kevin Jensen, director of the company's community educational programs, stand in front of one of Newport's green-built homes.

For the last couple of years, Kent LeSueur, president of Newport Homebuilders, says the desire to build all of Newport's homes to a high level of environmentally friendly standards has been tugging at his heart. "There is so much waste in homebuilding," he says. And homes consume such a large amount of energy and water that Mr. LeSueur felt he needed to change the traditional way homes are built.

The 15-year veteran of the homebuilding industry became active in the Green Built North Texas program of the Homebuilders Association of Greater Dallas and began learning about the latest technologies for green building.



Green Built North Texas set a goal of decreasing the impact of homes on the environment by 15 percent.

Mr. LeSueur wanted to do more. Instead of offering homebuyers incentives to encourage home sales, Newport is swimming against the tide by adding \$15,000 to \$20,000 to its costs to make each Newport home 25 percent "greener" than standard homes.

He says Newport is the only volume homebuilder to build all of its homes to that environmental standard.

"We can't offer price incentives like other builders," Mr. LeSueur says. "What we offer is lasting value."

Newport builds homes in four outer suburbs and in Dallas. It plans to build 125 homes next year, priced from \$300,000 to \$750,000, in Prosper, Lucas, Lantana and Keller. The homes have 3,000 to 5,000 square feet of living space.

Newport also builds a few houses on teardown lots in Dallas. Those homes start at \$1 million.

To drive home the importance of building green, Newport is spreading the environmental message to elementary school children in several of the northern suburbs where Newport builds homes. It bought and wrapped a fuel-efficient Toyota Scion with its logos and

information, including its promise to save energy and water and improve the air quality in its homes.

Newport representatives will take the Scion to schools and hand out brochures with tips for saving energy and water. To persuade children that they can save water in little ways like turning off the water while brushing their teeth, Newport will hand out toothbrushes. They will also distribute green wristbands to remind school children to live green.

"We want to teach children the living habits while they are at an impressionable age so ultimately it becomes their way of life," Mr. LeSueur says.

He thinks their parents are already getting the message -- "every time they fill up their car at the pump," he says.

"Even a year ago, most buyers would say the primary expense of their home was their mortgage. Now they are smarter. They are asking about the utility costs in the home," Mr. LeSueur says.

With the promise of 25 percent savings on utilities, Newport homeowners recognize this is the equivalent of not getting a utility bill for three months of the year, he says.

The savings are achieved through increasingly accepted practices -- by installing radiant-barrier roof decking that reduces ceiling heat gains from the attic by up to 42 percent, R-38 attic insulation, tighter air-conditioning ducts, Tyvek-wrapped exteriors, LOW-E vinyl windows, high-efficiency cooling equipment, EnergyStar-compliant dishwashers that use up to 25 percent less energy than standard models and drip irrigation in the flower beds.

Newport's green building is also about air quality, which is becoming a more critical issue as homes are wrapped tighter. An unintended consequence of making the homes more energy efficient is that air is trapped inside and fresh air has to be forced in.

Newport is installing systems that circulate fresh air on a frequent schedule. It is also sealing off the garages to keep the homes from sucking in carbon dioxide from idling cars.

In the construction process, Newport is also recycling its waste.

"Very few people realize that more than 8,000 pounds of waste is typically thrown into a landfill during the construction of a 2,000-square-foot home," Mr. LeSueur says. Newport recycles all the discarded lumber and brick. The lumber becomes mulch. The bricks are broken up and used around drains.

Newport believes that green-built homes, which are being registered on an HBA database, will have a higher resale value in five to 10 years. And he says Newport has not sacrificed any style or beauty in the homes to make them greener.

In a few years, Mr. LeSueur predicts, all homebuilders will be building environmentally friendly homes.

"Either buyers are going to demand it or cities are going to mandate it," he says.

Besides, homebuilders are notorious for following each other around like dogs in a circle, he says. Newport is determined to be the lead dog.

Stewart Lytle