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Green units profitable, says builder

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Globe Correspondent / January 3, 2008

For the most part, the houses on Marla Circle in Tyngsborough look like a typical snapshot of suburbia. The architectural style is Colonial or Greek Revival, blending with the New England feel of the town. Porticos and porches stretch outward into fertile lawns from clapboard buildings. Only the solar electrical panels on their roofs stand out.

Contrary to a longstanding perception among developers that building green homes is not financially feasible, Carter Scott, who built the development, says the subdivision is proof that developers can be environmentally sensitive - and make a profit.

"That's just not true," said Scott of the notion of economic infeasibility. "You can do it smarter and make more money in some cases."

Ecologically sensitive subdivisions such as the one in Tyngsborough are sprouting up in a number of places across the country, a trend that environmental advocates are touting as one means of dealing with the nation's growing energy crisis.

But according to Mark Archambault, smart-growth circuit rider for the Nashua River Watershed Association, that trend is not large enough.

The Groton, N.H.,-based association, which promotes the protection of the Nashua River

ecosystem, recently hosted Scott as one of two guest speakers for a forum on green housing.

Archambault said it is still a rarity for a developer to create ecologically sensitive housing, due mainly to the perception that it's a losing bet financially. Many developers may spice up their subdivisions with a few progressive environmental features, but few go so far as Scott and his Townsend-based company, Transformations Inc., he said.

Transformations introduced a number of environmental features in the five-home subdivision in Tyngsborough. Included in each house are solar panels for electricity, a system that extracts heat from the ground in winter, and rain gardens that naturally recharge water into the soil.

The development garnered the company the 2005 Energy Star Custom Builder of the Year Award from the US Green Building Council, a nonprofit organization that supports sustainable building practices.

"Subdivisions that have that combination of green drainage and energy-efficient buildings - that's a bit more rare," said Archambault. "Hopefully, it will become more of a trend."

Donald Sienkiewicz, a developer and real estate lawyer who also spoke at the November forum, said he is taking up the cause of the green movement and building 22 ecologically sensitive homes in Wilton, N.H. The homes, now going through the permitting process, will be super insulated, have solar electrical panels, and will feature large south-facing windows, which helps heat the buildings in winter, he said.

Despite the higher cost of building the houses in an ecologically sensitive way, Sienkiewicz is convinced the homes will command a higher market price. Such homes are not only good for the environment, but are also cheaper to heat in the winter, he said.

But Sienkiewicz said he does not support ecologically sensitive housing as a long-term sustainable policy for dealing with the nation's energy problems. The form of housing still takes up a lot of property and can require numerous daily car trips for its residents because of its

location, he said.

Instead, he is touting a European model for residential development, which clusters industry, retail establishments, and housing at a common location, minimizing the need for automobile travel.

"Ecological subdivisions are a little like putting lipstick on a pig," he said. "They consume way too much land and way too much energy."

Scott hasn't stopped in his efforts to build ecologically sensitive housing since building Marla Circle in 2005. He is finishing a 40-home ecologically sensitive subdivision in Townsend, and he is pursuing a 24-unit development in Harvard, currently in the permitting stage.

The houses in Townsend are priced between \$349,900 and \$429,900, he said.

Grant funding from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, an agency that promotes renewable energy, helped bring the cost of the Townsend homes down to a more reasonable price, said Scott.

With Marla Circle, the town originally limited the number of house lots on the property to four, said Scott. Using a creative and environmentally sensitive drainage design, he was able to eke out another house lot, making his company even more money than a conventional subdivision, he said.

"In the case of Marla Circle, we actually made more money off it," he said. "It can come back to you in different ways."■

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